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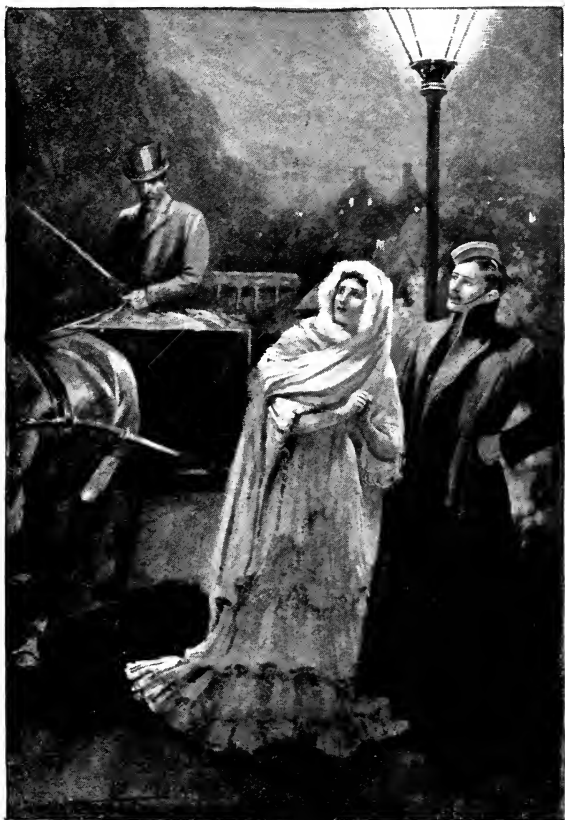
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Matthew
Austin



NELSON'S
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A soldier and his female companion drew back somewhat hastily on the approach of the dog-cart.



N

MATTHEW
AUSTIN

William
W. E. Norris

Thomas Nelson and
Sons, London, Edin-
burgh, and New York

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MATTHEW AUSTIN.

CHAPTER I.

MATTHEW AUSTIN.

“ I OUGHT to be ashamed of myself,” said Matthew Austin ; “ upon my word, I ought to be ashamed of myself ! What business has any man to be such a sybarite, while millions of his fellow-men are toiling from morning to night in coal mines and hideous, stifling factories, without so much as knowing that they live in a beautiful world ? Millions upon millions who haven’t even been allowed to learn, except in the coarsest and most rudimentary way, what the gratification of the senses means—condemned to lifelong servitude, looking forward to no change for the better on this side of the grave, though many of them must dread a change for the worse, and only a very few have some vague hope of compensation hereafter. It is really monstrous ; and even if their lot be inevitable, one hardly sees why they should accept it as such. We, the wealthy and educated minority, shouldn’t accept it if we were suddenly forced to change places with them, and found ourselves in an overwhelming majority. Some day there will be a vast social upheaval, I suppose.”

He finished his glass of claret and gazed across the fine damask tablecloth, the polished silver, the bowls and vases of cut blooms which had suggested these reflections to him, till his eyes rested upon the sunny garden beyond, where, through the open French windows, bril-

liant parterres and flowering shrubs could be seen basking in the still warmth of a summer afternoon. He had been eating his luncheon in solitude, so that there was no one to argue with him or to point out the futility of quarrelling with that unequal distribution of wealth which statesmen, philosophers, and divines have proclaimed from time immemorial to be the very foundation-stone of the social fabric. Presently he lighted a cigarette, not without a slight inward twinge of compunction—for the truth was that he could tolerate nothing save the very choicest tobacco, and was somewhat ultra-fastidious in all his tastes.

“After all,” he resumed in a more cheerful tone, “it is health, not wealth, that has the last word. A rich man is only a little better off, and probably feels much worse off, than a mechanic when he is told that he can never be well again. And rich people are often unhappy. More often, perhaps, than poor people, who haven’t time to brood over their sorrows. Poverty brings disease? Yes; but that subject is being dealt with, and in that direction there is something definite to work for. The bigger problem looks almost hopeless. All one can see is that it will have to be taken in hand, and that there is no justification worth listening to for luxury and selfishness.”

This indolent cogitator was not—as may have been supposed from the foregoing soliloquy—a millionaire or a great territorial magnate; being, in fact, only a young doctor at an inland watering-place, whose professional earnings, scanty as yet, were supplemented by a small private fortune. Yet a comparatively small income will go far towards providing a bachelor so situated with those luxuries which Matthew Austin chiefly valued—pretty surroundings, good wine, a fair collection of etchings, a well-selected library, and flowers all the year round—and if he was not rich, he had, within the limits of his desires, all that money could give him. So, at any rate, he thought; and more than once during this slack season of the year, when patients were few

and he had leisure to consider his ways, he had accused himself of unwarrantable self-indulgence.

His poorer neighbours would scarcely have brought that charge against him; for, like many another member of his profession, he would take no payment from them (save, from time to time, an extremely modest sum, which he accepted to free their minds from a burdensome sense of obligation), nor was he wont to spare himself in their service. He was every whit as attentive to a costermonger's wife as he would have been to a duchess, had any duchesses resided within reach of Wilverton, while it was pretty well known that he expended a good deal more in charity than in the purchase of wine or choice etchings or bulbs for his garden. Nevertheless, it remained true that he had a charming home, and that most of those who sang his praises dwelt in crowded alleys or dark, ill-ventilated cottages.

"There's no getting over it," he murmured, as he rose and strolled towards the open window; "I'm too disgracefully happy and comfortable!"

He stood for a while in the recess formed by the window in the solid, oak-panelled walls of his old dwelling—a tall, slim figure, which conveyed an impression of vigour and activity, though of no great muscular strength. He was at this time just thirty years of age, and was accounted handsome by the unmarried ladies of Wilverton, to whose opinions respecting his personal appearance he had hitherto remained sublimely indifferent. His crisp, wavy hair was of a chestnut-brown colour, he wore a closely-cut reddish beard, and his dreamy grey eyes were shaded by long, curved lashes. His nose was too large and too undecided in outline for beauty, but to set against that he had a well-shaped, sensitive mouth, about which a faint smile continually hovered. If Matthew Austin was not strictly handsome, he was at least good-looking, and, what was perhaps more important, he had the unmistakable look of being a good fellow.

"His face is his fortune," old Dr. Jennings, who would

fain have kept the whole practice of Wilverton to himself, would sometimes growl; "patients are bound to flock to a man who has the trick of looking so confoundedly sympathetic!"

As a matter of fact, he looked sympathetic for the simple reason that he was so. He generally knew, or thought he knew, how other people were feeling; a gift which has its drawbacks as well as its advantages. For example, he could seldom bring himself to scold his gardener (who often deserved to be scolded) because he was perfectly well aware that Bush, notwithstanding an assumption of stolid, surly unconcern when rebuked, was, in reality, mortified beyond all measure by the mildest remonstrance. It was, however, imperative that Bush should be remonstrated with that afternoon, and in a few minutes his master stepped resolutely forward to say what must be said. Crossing the smooth-shaven lawn, and guided by the sharp, recurrent click-click of a pair of shears, he soon came upon this thick-set, grey-bearded retainer of his, who was busily engaged in clipping a dwarf hedge, and who forestalled him by remarking,—

"Terrible weather for gardens, sir! No rain, nor yet no prospect o' none, and everythin' perishin', as you may say, for want o' water. 'Tis enough to break a man's 'eart!"

"But why should we break our hearts, and why should everything perish, when we possess a hose, in respect of which I am charged an additional water-rate of five pounds a year?" Mr. Bush's employer pertinently inquired.

"There's a deal of 'arm done to plants by over-waterin', sir—a deal of 'arm," answered the old gardener sententially.

"Oh, but not to *our* plants, Bush. They may suffer from mismanagement in many ways, and I'm afraid some of them do, but surely not in that way!"

Bush sniffed in an aggrieved manner, but made no articulate reply. He hated the labour of manipulating

a hose, and nobody knew better than he how effective a weapon judicious silence is.

"And talking about mismanagement," Mr. Austin went on; "I must say, Bush, that I wish you had treated those bouvardias as I told you to treat them. Not one of them will turn out satisfactorily now."

Bush sniffed again, and continued to clip with tremendous energy. It was one of his exasperating habits to work vigorously and to make as much noise as possible over it, while he was being spoken to, thus delicately implying not only that he was far too conscientious a man to waste time, but that he attached very little importance to his master's views upon the subject of horticulture.

Matthew Austin kept up the monologue as long as he could. He had various complaints to make, and he was determined to make them. But before he had quite reached the end of his list his patience and his severity alike gave out.

"I suppose it isn't much use," he said, laughing; "I suppose you will take your own way, whatever I may tell you to do. But you're wrong all the same."

"Maybe so, sir," answered Bush imperturbably. "I'm a mortal man, liable to horror, same as yourself, sir—though with more years' experience in the growin' of plants. I've heerd tell as even doctors makes their mistakes now and again, sir—killin' of folks as might ha' been kep' alive."

Matthew Austin laughed again.

"Oh yes, we make mistakes," he admitted; "much of our work is guesswork, just as yours is. Some of us are obstinate too, and cling to old methods after we have been shown the superiority of new ones—quite like gardeners."

"Not like me, sir," corrected Mr. Bush; "I ain't never too proud to larn."

"Only you haven't yet been fortunate enough to meet with the man who could teach you anything, eh? That is exactly where you resemble a considerable number of medical practitioners."

Bush laid down his shears, straightened his back, and surveyed the speaker with a smile of benevolent compassion.

"Lor' bless 'ee, sir," said he, "'t ain't no manner o' good to go ahead too fast! Noo methods?—well, I ain't agin tryin' of 'em; on'y when I tries 'em I don't say nowt about it. For why? 'Cause I don't want to pass for a born fool. Same with your own perfession, sir. 'Drugs,' says you to a sick person, 'ain't a-goin' to make you well, and drugs you shan't have.' What follers? Why, that sick person sends for hold Jennings, who gives him pills and draughts to his 'eart's content. 'Now, I've got summat for my money,' thinks he. Your way might be the right way, sir; but you didn't owt to have said so—no, that you didn't! Bread pills and 'armless mixtures o' many colours you should have give him, sir—and kep' your patient. You'll excuse the liberty o' me mentionin' it, sir, but it do reelly grieve me to 'ear what people says and to see you losin' fine oppoortoonities through sheer foolishness—if I may make bold for to call it so."

The young doctor seemed to be more amused than affronted by this plain language.

"Why should you wish me to be a humbug, Bush?" he asked.

"'Cause 'tis the way o' the world, sir," replied Bush, resuming his occupation. "'Cause human natur' is human natur'—ah! and will be long after you and me has no further call for physic."

Well, it was likely enough that this old fellow had acquired some knowledge of human nature, and perhaps—as Matthew reflected while he sauntered away—the said knowledge had been turned to account in his dexterous elusion of the subject more immediately under discussion. Nevertheless, Mr. Austin was not greatly alarmed by the note of warning which had been sounded for his benefit. He had not yet been a year at Wilverton, and, all things considered, he had done pretty well. Of course, Dr. Jennings, the established medical author-

ity of the place, and the chief advertiser of its mineral springs, which, fashionable in the last century, had since fallen into disrepute, had retained the great majority of the rich winter visitants; still, a few rather interesting cases had come in his own way, and he had had the satisfaction of treating them successfully. For the rest, he did not hesitate to advise a course of baths and water-drinking to gouty and rheumatic sufferers, the springs being really efficacious against their maladies, and although it was true that he had little faith in drugs, that scepticism was hardly so much of a drawback to him in a place where such a number of glasses of water had to be swallowed daily as it might have been elsewhere. He had no doubt that he would get on—if, indeed, “getting on” in a pecuniary sense were the chief aim and object of a man’s existence.

Personally he did not hold that view. He had, as has been mentioned, a little money of his own; he had secured a charming old house and a garden, in the progress of which he was profoundly interested; he had no thought of marrying, and he loved his profession. Had he not every reason to describe himself as happy and comfortable?—whether disgracefully so or not. His earlier years had been by no means exempt from unhappiness and discomfort; for his family had strenuously opposed his choice of an occupation, and indeed there had been a time when his parents had almost gone the length of disowning him. Probably they would have gone that length but for the invincible sweetness of his disposition and the impossibility of quarrelling with a man who refuses to be quarrelled with. But this was now an old story. His father and mother were both lying silent in the family vault down in Essex, and his brother, the present Sir Godfrey Austin, who had succeeded to the family honours, the not very extensive family acres and the seat in Parliament, which might also be regarded as almost a family appanage, had not inherited all the family prejudices. The present Sir Godfrey—a dull, worthy, middle-aged personage—saw no

particular reason why Matthew should not be a doctor, though the taste struck him as an eccentric one.

The late Sir Godfrey would have seen every reason why his son should at least not be a provincial doctor ; and, indeed, Matthew himself would have preferred to develop into the celebrated London physician that he might, and perhaps would have become, had not a long and dangerous illness played havoc with his prospects. But it had not been for the sake of social standing that he had coveted such advancement, nor was he personally ambitious. He was glad enough and thankful enough to have recovered—as he had almost now completely done—from the blood-poisoning which, through a mishap at one of the hospitals, had all but cost him his life, and he did not regret having yielded to the kindly solicitations of his metropolitan colleagues, who had urged him to seek lighter work and a fresher air. Well, the air of Wilverton was as fresh as could be desired ; as for the work, it was perhaps just a trifle too light during the summer months for an active man. This was what he was thinking when he returned to the house, and, picking up a treatise upon chrysanthemum culture, ensconced himself in an easy-chair. Easy-chairs and the culture of chrysanthemums were all very well, but at his time of life he ought to have had rather less leisure for making acquaintance with either ; possibly Bush had not been altogether in the wrong ; possibly he had made a mistake in neglecting opportunities for extending his regular practice. Certain it was that neither the town residents nor the neighbouring gentry had as yet shown much inclination to transfer their favours to him from pompous old Dr. Jennings, though some of them had coyly nibbled. Doubtless these would have bitten had he seen fit to bait his hook with the innocuous specifics which human nature demands as aids to faith, and not a few of them would have done wisely to bite—"For the truth is," reflected Matthew, with an amused smile, as he recalled certain consultations, "that poor, dear old Jennings knows nothing at all."

As chance would have it, an influential and irascible patient of Dr. Jennings's was at that same moment saying, in more forcible language, the very same thing ; and so it came to pass that the student of horticulture had not dawdled through very many pages of complicated instructions when his servant entered the room, bearing a large square envelope upon a salver.

"A groom has just brought this from Hayes Park, and he was to wait for an answer, if you please, sir," the man said.

Matthew tore open the note, glanced hastily at its contents, and nodded.

"All right," said he ; "I will be there as soon as possible. Just tell James to put the mare into the trap, will you ?"

Then, while he was waiting, he reopened the missive addressed to him, which was written in a dashing Italian hand, and in a style more original than lucid.

"Mrs. Frere presents her compliments to Mr. Austin, and would be *very* much obliged if he would come *at once* and see her little daughter, who, she fears, is suffering from incipient diphtheria or something dreadful of that kind. At least, it *looks* like it, and Mr. Frere quite thinks so too, and, of course, this makes us terribly anxious. So will Mr. Austin please come *without delay*, and the dog-cart should have been sent, only it seems that the boys have taken it out without ever saying a word—of course, before they knew that their sister was so ill. But perhaps Mr. Austin has a dog-cart of his own. Or, if not, he might take a fly."

Mr. Austin had a dog-cart of his own. As, moreover, he was the lucky possessor of a roan mare considerably fleetier than anything in Mr. Frere's stables, he felt pretty confident of reaching Hayes Park in advance of his verbal response. Presently he was bowling at a rapid pace along the highways and byways, his reins hanging loose in his hand—for a more careless driver never lived—

while his eyes wandered to right and left over the ripening cornfields and the woods, where patches of russet and yellow were already discernible.

"She sounds like a dear old lady," he thought, smiling retrospectively; "I wonder whether she talks as she writes. Mr. Frere, of course, one has seen—and listened to—at the club; but I don't remember to have heard anything about his family. I hope it isn't really a case of diphtheria: when once that gets into a house—There is no need to anticipate the worst though. Posterity ought to be much happier than we are a century or two hence, when miasmatic diseases will have been exterminated. Only then, I suppose, other problems will have to be faced, which look uncommonly awkward at this distance."

He went on, as his habit was, with these and similar disconnected musings until his groom, who had been murmuring directions in his ear from time to time, said suddenly,—

"Off side, please, sir, through the iron gates. *Oh, Lord!*"

"It's all right, James," laughed Mr. Austin, glancing over his shoulder at his agitated henchman; "I have never yet turned you out at a corner, and the chances are that I never shall. Dear me! what a beautiful old place!"

It certainly was a very beautiful old Tudor edifice that came within the field of his vision as he drove up the gentle ascent which led towards it between two parallel rows of magnificent limes, and in days of yore the Freres of Hayes Park had been county magnates of the first water; but now, like many other county magnates, they had to keep up a large establishment upon a lamentably reduced rent-roll, and, this being impossible, the large establishment was no longer maintained. Half the house was permanently closed, the gardens were neglected, while the vast stables had seldom more than three occupants at a time. When it is added that Mr. Frere was the father of six children,

some of whom had cost, and were costing, him a good deal of money, allowance will doubtless be made for the irritability which was a prominent feature in an otherwise amiable character. Moreover, he had, on an average, at least two sharp fits of gout every year, which is more than any man's temper can be expected to stand.

And indeed it was of his gout, not of his daughter's illness, that the fussy, little white-haired man began to speak as soon as the sound of wheels upon the gravel brought him out to the doorstep.

"Come in—come in—very glad to see you!" said he. "I shall hope to consult you in future when I have occasion for it. That fellow Jennings is past all bearing! I told him so plainly the last time he was here. 'What's the use of you?' I said. 'That's what I want to know. What's the use of you? Here am I, getting worse instead of better, and you can't even suggest anything!' Because, hang it all! I don't call it a suggestion to prescribe a course of Wilverton waters. No, no; I've lived here, man and boy, for a matter of sixty-five years, and you don't take me in with nonsense of that sort. So I made no bones about it; I said, 'Look here, Jennings, I've had a lot of patience with you, and it's very evident to me that you're no good. Now, I'm going to try younger blood; I'm going to send for Mr. Austin.' He told me I could do as I pleased. Do as I pleased!—I should rather think I could! The deuce is in it if a man mayn't choose his own doctor."

"But I understood that it was to see your daughter that I was sent for to-day," Matthew ventured to observe.

"Oh, poor little Maggie—yes, to be sure! Only a feverish cold, I hope; but Mrs. Frere worked herself up into a state of mind. You know what women are. Come along and look at your patient; I'm sure you'll say it's nothing serious. Jennings would have pulled a long face, and set about drawing up a long bill at once. That's his little way—confound him!"

CHAPTER II.

THE FRERE FAMILY.

MR. FRERE led the way up a broad, shallow staircase, lighted by a great stained-glass window, upon which coats of arms and heraldic devices were emblazoned. Then there was a long oak-panelled corridor to be traversed before the old gentleman paused, with his hand upon a swing-door covered with red baize.

"These are the children's quarters," he explained. "In days gone by, when there was always a certain number of visitors, it was thought desirable to exclude the youngsters; but I don't know why we shouldn't economize labour by stowing 'em away in some of the empty spare rooms now. We're more than half shut up as it is, and the furniture dropping to pieces, they tell me. Can't afford a lot of housemaids, you see. What the deuce is going to become of us poor landowners is more than I can guess. It's all very fine for farmers to talk about being ruined, but—well, what price are you paying for hay now?"

"I can't quite say," answered Matthew, who in truth could seldom quite say what price he was paying for anything. "Something like £8 a ton, I think."

"The devil you are! Ah, well, the farmer and the consumer are swindled, I've no doubt; but that's a poor consolation for the landlord who can't get his rents. Now, it just comes to this, you know; are we to be exterminated, or are we not? I take it that, as a class, we are the most patient and the most ill-used body of men in the entire community. We make no outcry; we go on paying our rates and taxes—and pretty heavy they are, too!—without a murmur; we submit to be treated as though we were rich, when most of us don't

know where to turn for a spare five-pound note, by George ! But we have our rights, mind you, even though we aren't Socialists or Fenians or agricultural labourers. Yes, we have our rights, and a time may come when we shall be driven to fight for them."

Matthew began to wonder whether the time would ever come for him to be conducted to his patient ; but, just as he was about to offer a gentle reminder that he was a physician, not a politician, the swing-door was opened from the other side, giving passage to a tall, fair-haired girl, who may have been drawn to the spot by the stentorian voice of the aggrieved landowner.

" Oh, there you are, Anne," Mr. Frere said in a slightly reproachful tone, as though he had been searching in vain for this young lady. " Well, I have brought Mr. Austin, you see—my daughter Anne, Mr. Austin. How is Maggie now ?—and what has become of your mother ?"

" Mamma has gone downstairs to write some letters before the post leaves ; Maggie seems to be a little more feverish, and her head aches a good deal," replied Miss Frere, after bowing to the doctor.

She had a low-pitched, musical voice, Matthew noticed. For the rest, being anxious to get over preliminaries and proceed to business, he did not notice much about her, except that she was remarkably tall and remarkably fair.

" Oh, well, a headache—of course she has a headache," Mr. Frere returned rather testily ; " that doesn't prove anything. Now, Mr. Austin, if you will be so kind as to follow Anne, she will show you the child's bedroom. I'll take myself off out of your way for the present ; but Mrs. Frere will like to see you by-and-by. You will find us both in the drawing-room after you have made your examination."

Matthew Austin, like most doctors, had two manners, and the professional manner which he assumed as soon as Miss Frere had led him into the sick-room was a very quiet and somewhat distant one. He was not fond of being spoken to or interfered with while at work, nor were bystanders encouraged to loquacity by his impas-

sive reticence. However, neither Miss Frere nor the old nurse, who was seated by the bedside of the sufferer, a bright-eyed little maiden of fourteen, ventured to interrogate him, save with their eyes, and they answered the few questions that he put to them briefly and intelligently enough. The sight of the stethoscope which he presently produced seemed to alarm them both; but they heroically held their peace when, after using it, he replaced it in his pocket, and it was Maggie who broke the silence by asking, in a small, awestruck voice,—

“Oh, please, am I going to die?”

“Yes,” answered the doctor, his features relaxing into a smile, “we are all going to die; but we all mean to live as long as we can, and you are rather more likely to keep your ninetieth birthday than most of us. To-night you will have some medicine which will do your head good and won’t be at all nasty, and to-morrow, I hope, you will be feeling much better. Only you must make up your mind to stay in bed for the present.”

Miss Frere followed him out into the passage, and he replied at once to her unspoken query.

“Oh no, I don’t think so; unfavourable symptoms would have been almost certain to show themselves by this time if there had been anything of the sort. I must not speak quite positively until to-morrow; but in all probability there is nothing the matter beyond a rather severe chill.”

“Oh, thank you!” exclaimed the girl, with a look of such heartfelt gratitude that he laughed outright.

“Do you know,” said he, “that you pay us a very poor compliment when you thank us—as most of you do—for telling you that there is no reason to be alarmed? You treat us as the savages treat their medicine-men; you seem to think that diseases and cures are at our beck and call.”

“I suppose we do,” she answered, smiling; “but perhaps, after all, that is just as well. Isn’t faith half the battle?”

“Oh, it goes a long way, no doubt. Faith helps to

make the world go round, and even misdirected faiths are better than none. Considering how ignorant we all are, that faculty of firm, illogical belief which I can see by your face that you possess is an immense blessing."

The girl drew herself up slightly. Perhaps she did not particularly care about being told what conclusions this stranger had drawn from a scrutiny of her features; perhaps, also, she failed to see why she should be called stupid by implication. But Matthew Austin had not meant to bring any accusation of that kind against her, nor was he in the least conscious of having given offence. He was something of a physiognomist; he had an absent-minded trick of saying what he thought, and, as Miss Frere stood beside him, with the light of the sinking sun upon her face, he had taken rapid note of certain indications connected with her eyes and the set of her lips. To tell the truth, the interest which she had aroused in him was but momentary, and he at once recollected that the anxious parents were waiting for him below.

"I must go down and reassure your father and mother," he said. "I will look in again to-morrow morning, when I shall fully expect to find my patient convalescent."

She did not offer to show him where the drawing-room was—which omission on her part may possibly have caused his thoughts to recur to her while he descended the staircase; for the fact was that such young ladies as he had hitherto met in Wilverton and its vicinity had shown no sort of inclination to leave him to himself. Of the young lady who was thus exceptional his mind's eye retained a clear impression, and his inward remark was that she was doubtless one of the reigning local beauties. It was little that he knew about beauties or prevailing fashions in beauty, local or otherwise. Had he been better posted he would have recognized that Miss Frere's comeliness belonged to a type which, for the time being, has ceased to command universal admiration. The low, broad forehead, the straight nose and the arched eyebrows were well enough; but the general effect, enhanced by an almost total absence

of colouring, was somewhat too cold and severely classical for modern taste. Anne Frere's hair was of so light a flaxen as to be within a few shades of white, her cheeks were always pale, and her eyes could only be called blue because they were not grey. Her mouth, too, though there was no fault to be found with its shape, was scarcely the sort of mouth which the young man of the present day honours with his approbation, while her expression did not vary much or frequently. Nevertheless, she was admitted to be handsome; and the fact that she was so was merely an unimportant detail in Matthew Austin's concise summing up of her.

"Strong constitution, but slow circulation," was what he said to himself as he made his way downstairs. "Evidently a good girl, and probably the mainstay of the household; for one can guess that her father and mother are not very efficient people. I wonder why she isn't happy, and what that quiet, resigned look means? Pecuniary difficulties?—or an unfortunate attachment, perhaps? Well, she'll pull through her trouble, whatever it may be, for she has too much pride and too much courage to be peevish—not to mention the faith. One doesn't like to see that look upon the face of such a young girl though."

In the hall he was met by Mr. Frere, whose long sigh of satisfaction, on hearing his favourable report, gave evidence of an anxiety which had not been confessed.

"I was sure of it!" the old gentleman exclaimed triumphantly; "I was sure you would take a common-sense view. Now Jennings, as I told Mrs. Frere, would have kept us on tenterhooks for a week, and then pretended that he had saved the child's life. Come in and see my wife. It wouldn't be the slightest use for *me* to try and convince her that she had made all this fuss about nothing."

Matthew was conducted into a room of immense length, which, as he noticed during his rapid progress towards the farther end of it, was filled with beautiful things. Poverty, after all, is a relative term, and if the Chippendale furniture, the inlaid tables and cabinets, the rare

old china and the countless silver knick-knacks were heirlooms, certain screens and bits of embroidery and other products of Egypt and Japan looked like purchases of recent date. The owner of that drawing-room, Matthew reflected, must be a woman possessed of refined tastes, as well as the means of gratifying them; and, indeed, the owner of the drawing-room, when she rose from her writing-table to greet him, struck him as being in admirable harmony with her surroundings.

Mrs. Frere was a charming old lady, who might almost have passed for a young lady if her hair had not been as white as her husband's; for neither time nor trouble had furrowed her smooth cheeks. Her small, slim figure was that of a girl; her pretty face was that of a baby; her manner, too, had retained the childish simplicity which, during fifty odd years, had made her at once the pet and the laughing-stock of her friends and relatives. She was, as Matthew presently discovered, a little deaf; but even that provoking infirmity, which is so apt to destroy the popularity of less favoured mortals, was, in her case, an additional charm, lending a certain piquancy to her inconsequent remarks.

"I am so very glad George persuaded me to send for you," said she, with amusing candour, after the young doctor had allayed her fears. "I was rather against it, you know—do sit down—I was rather against it, because of poor old Dr. Jennings, who will naturally feel hurt. Still, if he only knew it, it is really much better for him not to come here any more. Latterly I have been kept in a constant state of terror lest one of his visits should end in his being kicked down the steps by George, who is quite dangerous when he has a fit of gout coming on. Yes, George, dear, I see you making faces at me, but I am not saying anything imprudent; I am sure you have told Mr. Austin all about your grievances by this time. And so you really think my poor little Maggie is all right?"

"Oh no," answered Matthew, laughing. "I haven't pronounced her all right yet; but I hope there will be an improvement within a few hours after she has taken

her medicine, which I am going to send to her from the chemist's as I go back. I shall see her again to-morrow morning, and unless she becomes more feverish during the night——”

“Oh, but why should you hurry back?” interrupted Mrs. Frere. “Why shouldn't we send for the medicine? Then you might stay and dine with us and watch the effect of it, which would be so much nicer! George, couldn't you persuade Mr. Austin to stay and dine?”

Mr. Frere threw up his hands deprecatingly.

“Just listen to her!” he ejaculated; “that's my wife all over! As if a busy man had nothing better to do than to take pot-luck with his patients in order to suit their convenience. Not that I shouldn't be only too delighted to offer you our humble hospitality, but I really haven't the impudence to suggest such a thing.”

“But I am not at all busy,” Matthew answered, “and, as a matter of fact, I should rather like, if I could, to watch the effect of the medicine. May I send my man to Wilverton for it, and tell him to bring my dress-clothes at the same time?”

If Dr. Jennings had been unceremoniously invited to dine at Hayes Park (only he never would have been so invited), his acknowledgment of the honour conferred upon him would have been very ceremonious indeed. He would have bowed down to the ground, his round, rubicund face would have assumed a richer tint; probably he would have consulted his notebook and murmured that he might just be able to manage it; certainly he would not have said, as Matthew presently did,—

“Then I'll leave you to finish your letters. I shall go and try to amuse Miss Maggie until it is time to dress. Don't bother about me; I can always get on with children.”

Mr. Austin was allowed, after some perfunctory protests, to employ himself as he pleased, and when, about two hours later, he again met his hostess, she ingenuously told him what a pleasing contrast he presented to his predecessor.

“One can't expect provincial doctors to be gentlemen, you know,” said she, “and, of course, it is a great piece

of good luck to chance upon one who is. Especially if he is a good doctor into the bargain—as I am sure you are. It is such a bore to have to deal with people who think they oughtn't to mention one's inside without apologizing, isn't it?"

"If I had anything wrong with my inside, I should prefer a good doctor to a gentleman," remarked Matthew; but Mrs. Frere did not hear him.

"I remember your father quite well," she went on; "I used often to meet him at parties in the days of our prosperity, when we had a London house. Now we are so dreadfully short of money that even a month of the season in a hotel or lodgings can't be thought of—which is unfortunate on poor, dear Anne's account. Personally, I can't say that I so very much mind being poor. I am quite contented to stay at home and look after the garden; though I do wish George could spare me a little more to spend upon bulbs. Didn't somebody tell me that you were a great gardener? That is delightful, because it provides one with a subject, and really, in these parts, there is nothing as a rule to talk about except one's neighbours."

If Mrs. Frere was given to talking about her neighbours, she certainly was not given to speaking ill of them, nor had she ever been known to be at a loss for subjects of conversation. She prattled on, after Matthew had led her into the spacious, dimly-lighted dining-room, wandering from one topic to another, and paying little heed to his replies, while he amused himself with mental notes upon the remaining members of the small party. The tall, handsome young fellow who had been introduced to him as "our boy Harry," and who was about to join his regiment in India; Dick, a curly-headed lad of sixteen or thereabouts, who would shortly be returning to Eton; Anne, whose flawless complexion and white shoulders were set off to advantage, he noticed, by the low-cut black dress that she wore—all these kept up a ceaseless flow of chatter which neither interrupted nor was interrupted by their mother's placid monologue.

"Nice, simple, happy sort of people," Matthew thought; "all except the girl, who seems more complicated and less happy. I must try to have a talk with her afterwards and find out more about her."

The bachelors who dwelt within reach of Hayes Park could have told him that it was not so easy to arrive at a comprehension of Miss Frere, most of them having tried their hands at her, and having ended by pronouncing her too stiff and "stand-off" to merit continued exertions. There was very little stiffness, however, in her manner towards Mr. Austin, whom she addressed several times across the table, and whose previous unintentional familiarity she seemed to have forgotten or forgiven.

"What did you do to Maggie after you turned nurse and me out of the room?" she asked. "I went to see her just before dinner, and she said you had only been playing dominoes with her, but I can hardly believe that a game of dominoes will cure a sore throat."

"It won't do that," answered Matthew, "but it will sometimes act as a febrifuge. Besides, we were talking as well as playing."

"I should rather think you were!" remarked Dick, with a chuckle. "If ever there lived a girl who could talk the hind leg off a donkey that girl is Maggie."

"Ah, but she won't talk to everybody, and she has been quiet enough all day, poor child," Miss Frere said. "Yet Mr. Austin rebuked me just now for treating him, as he said, like a medicine-man. Why, that is exactly what he is! Aren't medicine-men supposed to work cures without much help from medicine, and don't they work upon the minds rather than the bodies of their patients?"

"And no fools they!" cried Mr. Frere. "Give me a doctor who will cheer me up and tell me I shall be all right in a day or two. How the dickens can I be expected to get well when a fellow shakes his head over me and says a mild attack of gout generally lasts for a month or six weeks? The very next time that I feel a premonitory twinge, I shall send off post-haste for the medicine-man, I can tell you!"

Thus it was that Matthew Austin obtained a nickname which clung to him, and was eventually used by many persons who knew nothing of the time and place of its origin. At the moment he scarcely noticed it, but remarked, laughing,—

“Now, doesn’t this show how impossible it is to please everybody? You seem inclined to praise me for adopting the very system which my gardener solemnly warned me this afternoon would be my ruin if I persisted in it. His notion is that drugs may not be of much use, but that human nature is so constituted that no sick person will consent to be cured without them—and I am by no means sure that he is wrong.”

“Then,” observed Miss Frere, “your gardener means just what you mean. All the same, I am glad you took his advice and wrote a prescription for Maggie. Credulous as I am, I do feel more comfortable with a few outward and visible aids to faith.”

Well, at any rate, Mr. Austin’s method of treatment proved effectual, whether he was indebted to his prescription or not, and when he drove home by moonlight, he had the double satisfaction of reflecting that he had left his patient sound asleep and had added to the list of his friends. Both Mr. and Mrs. Frere had expressed in warm terms their gratitude, as well as the pleasure that it had given them to make his acquaintance at last; the boys had made him promise to go out rabbit-shooting with them some day, and he had undertaken to fulfil the dearest wish of Maggie’s heart by procuring a dormouse for her. However, he had not succeeded in making any fresh discoveries about Anne, who had retired to her sister’s room immediately after dinner, and had only reappeared to say good-night. The curiosity that he felt respecting her might, in the case of any other man, have been the prelude to tenderer emotions; but Matthew was not of an amorous temperament.

“Perhaps,” said he to himself, as he grazed the gatepost on turning out into the high road, “it is only a tendency towards anæmia after all.”

CHAPTER III.

IN MRS. FRERE'S GARDEN.

As had been anticipated, Maggie's illness proved to be a comparatively trifling affair; still it was necessary to keep watch over her for a few days, lest more serious developments should arise out of it, and for a few days, therefore, Matthew was able with a clear conscience to pay that morning visit to Hayes Park which his patient implored him on no account to omit. She had fallen in love with him, as his patients invariably did, and insisted upon his remaining with her for a good hour on each occasion, during which time she monopolized nearly the whole of the conversation, only pausing every now and again to listen to his instructions as to the care of the dormouse, which he had not forgotten to purchase for her.

Sometimes these interviews were interrupted by the entrance of other members of the family, whose loquacity was at least equal to that of its youngest scion; sometimes, also, Miss Frere, the sole exception in that respect to the general rule, would look in to protest against such ruthless frittering away of a professional man's precious moments; but Matthew always declared that he had nothing particular to do, while Maggie averred that he was there by his own free will and pleasure. "He likes it, Anne. He says he likes it, and he wouldn't say he did if he didn't, because that would be a fib, you know." Which seemed unanswerable.

But a day came when common honesty compelled Miss Maggie's medical attendant to announce that he must take leave of her in his professional capacity. Her governess, who had been absent on a holiday, had returned, and he felt bound to certify that she was in a fit state to resume her studies. This communication,

which was very ill-received upstairs, was not welcomed even in the drawing-room.

"Oh, *how* tiresome of you!" Mrs. Frere exclaimed. "And all this time you have been so taken up with Maggie that I have never managed to show you my garden. You haven't been out rabbiting with the boys either; but I suppose we mustn't be too exacting. Does this mean that we are to see no more of you until one of us contrives to fall ill?"

"Oh, I hope not," answered Matthew, laughing. "I am such a wretched shot that I think I had better leave the rabbits to your sons; but I should like very much to see the garden some afternoon, if you will let me."

"Then—let me see—could you come over and lunch on Saturday? Poor Harry has to sail from Portsmouth on Thursday, and Dick goes back to school the next day; so we shall all be feeling very lonely and miserable, and it would be kind of you to look in upon us and cheer us up. Mr. Frere will be very cross, I am afraid; but you mustn't mind him. As for Anne, she will be weeping into her plate and drying her eyes with her napkin, poor thing, as she always does when her brothers have to leave her. At my time of life," added Mrs. Frere, with a comfortable sort of sigh, "one learns to look out for consolations. The garden is one, and you, if you are good-natured, will be another."

So Matthew was good-natured, and when he reached Hayes Park on the appointed day he found the reduced party somewhat less dismal than he had been led to expect. The head of the house, to be sure, was a trifle choleric, and fell foul of the servants upon small provocation; but Anne shed no tears in public, nor did she fail to put in an occasional remark as often as her mother allowed her a chance of so doing. However, she retired immediately on the conclusion of the meal, after which Mrs. Frere, taking up an old straw hat and a sunshade, said,—

"Now light your cigar and prepare yourself to make any amiable speeches that you can about a semi-wilderness. Once upon a time we used to pride ourselves upon

our lawns and shrubs, not to speak of our flowers; but what can one do with only four men to attend to everything?—George, dear, I don't think we will take you; you are so depressing with your lamentations.—Besides," she added, turning to her guest, without lowering her voice, "I never like him to see the conservatories if I can help it, because he at once begins to talk about cutting down expenses, and even as it is I have had to abandon orchids altogether."

"Stuff and nonsense!" cried Mr. Frere; "you gave up orchids because your fool of a gardener couldn't grow 'em; don't make me responsible for things that I've nothing to do with. I couldn't have induced you to relinquish a single exotic—or a double one either, for the matter of that—if I had tried."

"Yes, dear, do go out for a ride," returned his wife placidly; "I am sure Mr. Austin will excuse you. You can have the cob now that the boys are gone, and a good shaking-up will put you into better spirits."

It was true enough that four men did not suffice to keep the lawns and alleys and borders round about Hayes Park in trim; still, Matthew's cry of surprise and admiration, after he had followed his hostess to the broad terrace on the south side of the house, was perfectly sincere. Beyond the lichen-grown stone parapet, upon which he dropped his elbows, stretched long expanses and vistas of the smoothest turf, bordered by old-fashioned clipped yews; advanced as the season was, the beds were still gay with begonias, asters, zinnias, and dahlias; arches covered with climbing roses displayed plenty of late blooms, and in the far distance, through an opening in the trees, could be discerned the faint blue cloud of smoke which hung over Wilverton.

"Upon my word," he exclaimed, "I don't think you have much to complain of!"

"It is pretty, isn't it?" said Mrs. Frere in a tone of quiet satisfaction. "Nothing can quite spoil the dear old place, though there are a hundred and fifty things which want doing to it, and which perhaps you don't

notice, seeing it for the first time. Didn't I hear you accuse me of complaining just now? That was rather hard upon me; because, in spite of everything, I don't think I am very much given that way. Of course, one does feel the difference between present times and old times; but, as I always tell George, 'What can't be cured must be endured,' and it is worse for the young people than it is for us."

In her leisurely, unceasing way, she continued to dilate upon the discomforts of a falling income while she conducted her hearer through the conservatories and stove-houses, which seemed to be tolerably well furnished, notwithstanding hard times. Harry, who, in the natural course of things, would have held a commission in the Guards until he married, was compelled to go off on foreign service in a line regiment, and must not dream of marrying, unless, perchance, he should fall in with some wandering heiress; what was to become of Dick Mrs. Frere could not imagine; but he would certainly have to earn his own living some day, and in the meantime there would be the heavy cost of his school and college education to defray. "Besides which, one must expect him to run up a few bills, poor boy, like other people."

She talked about her domestic affairs as frankly and naturally as a child talks about its toys, and with an equal confidence that what interested her would interest her companion.

"Well, then there is Anne, you know," she went on. "Anne is very good about it, and says she doesn't care; but one really feels that it is rather too bad to deny her the amusements and opportunities that other girls have. Of course, she has been presented and has gone through a scrap of a season; but there, unfortunately, it has had to end. My married daughter, Lady Arvagh, would be willing to take her out; only they themselves have no London house, and as poor Lord Arvagh is an Irish landlord and Kate is a good deal occupied, what with having continual babies and one thing and another, they aren't much use. Well, one can but hope that somebody may

eventually turn up. People do sometimes turn up in the country, and now that I come to think of it, it was at a country house that I first met George."

Matthew was upon the point of inquiring whether there was no young man in the neighbourhood whom Miss Anne might possibly be induced to regard with favour, when he was preserved from putting what, as he subsequently reflected, would have been an indiscreet question, by the advent of Mr. Frere, who came bustling out of the house to say,—

"My dear, Mrs. Jennings has called, and they have let her in. I can't face the woman alone; but I must see her, or she'll think I'm frightened of her. Come along, and let us get the interview over. What idiots these servants are! Not but what they do it on purpose, I believe!"

"Oh, it can't be helped," Mrs. Frere responded tranquilly. "Mrs. Jennings is a sensible sort of woman, and if I tell her that we found it necessary to make a change she will understand. After all, she must know what a stupid old thing her husband is."

"And in case she shouldn't, you will tell her, I suppose. Oh, you are capable of it, my dear; I have heard you say worse things than that before now. And then you can't make out why people are so ready to take offence!"

"Now, George, was it you or I who vowed that Dr. Jennings should never write another prescription under your roof?"

The couple moved away towards the house, wrangling amicably as they went, and entirely oblivious of the circumstance that they had left Dr. Jennings's supplanter to take care of himself. It was their habit to dispute together in this way, each deeming the other to be nothing but a grown-up child, and neither being very far wrong in that estimate; but their mutual affection had increased rather than diminished during some thirty years of married life, and if Mrs. Frere believed in her heart that "George" could do no wrong, it is certain that her wishes had far more weight with the testy old gentleman than those of all the rest of the family put together. Perhaps

that was one reason why scarcely as much had been done for the rest of the family as might have been done.

Matthew gazed after them, laughing softly, and mentally thanking his stars that he had not been invited to take part in the forthcoming encounter with Mrs. Jennings, an ill-tempered, gossiping old woman, with whom he had hitherto only managed to maintain relations of amity by dint of sedulously keeping out of her way. "She will assuredly hate me now," he mused, "for these are the first patients whom I have actually filched from her husband. I don't suppose she can do me very much harm though."

He did not in the least mind being left to his own devices, and soon became so absorbed in the scrutiny of sundry carefully-shielded shrubs which were seldom to be met with in that part of England that he did not hear a light footfall upon the grass behind him. He turned round, with a start, when Anne's voice said, close to his ear,—

"I came out to apologize for my unceremonious parents. I fled upstairs as soon as I was told that Mrs. Jennings was in the drawing-room, and from an upper window I saw them coolly turn their backs upon you. If you want to go away, please don't think it your duty to wait and say good-bye to them. I will make your excuses."

Most men on being thus addressed would have felt bound to say or hint that Mr. and Mrs. Frere had been admirably replaced; but Matthew Austin thought it quite enough to reply, simply and honestly,—

"Oh, I'm in no hurry, thanks; I could amuse myself for hours in a garden like this. I wonder how your gardener manages to grow such fine *escallonias* out in the open; surely that is very unusual in these parts, isn't it?"

"I'm afraid I can't tell you," Miss Frere answered. "I am very fond of flowers, but I know hardly anything about them, and still less about trees and shrubs. You are a learned botanist, aren't you?"

"No, only a learner. Gardening is one of the hobbies one takes up as one gets on in life, and when other things fail. At your age one naturally prefers the other things."

"What other things?" the girl inquired.

"Your mother says you are very unselfish about it; still it is hard lines—of course it must be. Personally, I have never seen anything of fashionable life, nor ever wished for it; but I can quite understand that to be cut off from that sort of thing may be as great a deprivation to some people as it would be to me to be deprived of—well, of flowers or tobacco."

"I shouldn't have thought that I looked very much like one of those people. Anyhow, I am not one of them. If I had no worse trouble than being obliged to stay at home from year's end to year's end I should have little enough to complain of!"

Unconventional though he was apt to be, Matthew did not like to ask her point-blank what her troubles were; but after they had strolled silently across the sward for a few yards, he remarked,—

"There is a sovereign remedy for every trouble under the sun."

"And that is?"

"To forget it. Of course I don't dare to offer this as a prescription; my patients would set me down as a most unfeeling brute if I were to do that. But sometimes I manage to force it upon them without their knowledge, and often Nature forces it upon them. If it were not so, the average duration of life would be shortened to an extent which would quite bewilder the compilers of statistics."

"Ah, you are talking of troubles that can't be mended. I dare say it is possible to forget for a few hours that one has a mortal disease, and the loss of some one whom one has loved is evidently a sorrow which can be forgotten in time. But while there is life there is hope, and while there is hope there is sure to be unhappiness. You may induce your patients to forget that they are dying, but you don't very often induce their husbands or wives to forget it, do you?"

"Not very often, perhaps; still the thing is to be done. It is a question of having plenty of necessary work to do. The poor are better off than the rich in

that respect." He added after a pause, "I should think you would be fairly well provided with occupations."

"Oh yes; I do all the housekeeping now, and during the holidays there is Maggie to be looked after; besides which, I have the usual routine of parish visiting, and so on. All that doesn't prevent——" But here she checked herself and laughed. "One would think that I was seriously consulting you!" she exclaimed. "I only wanted to point out that your remedy won't suit every case; I didn't mean to imply that I myself was suffering from some dire affliction."

"Nevertheless, that was what you did imply," Matthew observed, smiling.

"Did I really? Well, then, if you will promise not to tell anybody, I will confess what is the matter. I can't afford to employ a London dressmaker; I can't get a Wilverton dressmaker to fit me, and not for one moment can I forget that I carry about with me creases and wrinkles where there ought to be none. Good gracious! here comes that dreadful old Mrs. Jennings. Heaven be praised! she is short-sighted, and she hasn't seen me yet. I must fly before she does. Good-bye."

Thereupon Miss Frere promptly vanished behind one of the tall yew hedges, leaving Matthew with a slight sense of having been unjustly snubbed. Surely the girl might have understood that he had not been intentionally impertinent!

However, he had to postpone further reflections upon that subject; for now Mrs. Frere joined him, accompanied by her unwelcome visitor, of whom she was obviously longing to get rid, and,—

"O Mr. Austin," said she, "Mrs. Jennings very kindly offers to give you a lift home. I heard that you had sent your dog-cart away, and I am sure you will be glad to be saved that long walk."

"Not at all, I assure you! I enjoy a walk," Matthew was beginning eagerly; but Mrs. Frere made a grimace of such piteous entreaty at him that he perceived what was required of him, and ended his sentence with a murmur

of thanks to the other lady, adding that they ought to start at once, as the evening dews were now so heavy.

Shortly afterwards he was being driven swiftly across the park in the smart victoria which was a symbol of Dr. Jennings's lucrative practice, while the whispered speech with which Mrs. Frere had taken leave of him still rang in his ears.

"So good of you to take her away! And it's just as well that you should be seen with her, you know—shows there is no ill-feeling."

There was plenty of ill-feeling on the part of Mrs. Jennings, a stout, elderly woman, with a face and figure much resembling those which frequently adorn the bows of coasting brigs; but she endeavoured to conceal it, and, instead of vilifying the Freres, spoke warmly, if a trifle patronizingly, in their praise.

"Such thoroughly good, worthy people! I am really very fond of Mrs. Frere, and always make a point of going to see her as often as I can. But of course I have so many visits to pay! However, as I was saying to her just now, I am determined not to let her drop."

Mrs. Jennings had said no such thing, and would never have been so foolish as to say it. In the neighbourhood of watering-places like Wilverton, "county people" stand in much the same relation to town residents as royal personages do to the dwellers in Mayfair and Belgravia; so that, although spiteful things may be said of them behind their backs, it would be a sad mistake to be guilty of an impertinence to their faces. The backs of the Frere family being now safely turned to Mrs. Jennings, she proceeded to descant compassionately upon their fallen grandeur.

"I should be very sorry to lose them; still, I can't help feeling that it would be almost better if they were to let the place and go away. You see, it isn't only the mortification of having to live as they do now, but there is that shocking scandal about the eldest son, which they must be perpetually reminded of while they remain at home."

Matthew being resolved to die rather than make any

inquiry as to the alleged scandal, she was obliged to tell him what it was without having been asked. Spencer Frere, it seemed, had done something quite awful. It might have been forgery, or it might have been embezzlement—Mrs. Jennings could not say for certain—but, at any rate, he had cost his father immense sums of money, and at last the old man, in a violent fit of passion, had turned him adrift.

“What has become of him nobody knows. He may be in the workhouse, and I should think very likely he is. Isn’t it dreadful?”

“If he had been guilty of forgery or embezzlement he would be in prison, would he not?” Matthew asked.

“Well, if he had been *proved* guilty, I suppose he would; but no doubt such things can be hushed up. Of course, one makes every allowance for the poor old man; still, I can’t help rejoicing for my husband’s sake—though I am sorry for yours—that he has chosen you as his future medical adviser. Often and often Dr. Jennings has come home and said to me, ‘Really, Jane, I don’t think I ought to put up any longer with Mr. Frere’s insulting language;’ but I have always begged him to go on and take no notice. Who wouldn’t be soured by such experiences! Not that I should like the feeling of having turned a son of mine away to starve, whatever his offence might have been; but, as I say, one *must* make allowances. I do trust that poor Anne may yet marry well, and they have certainly done their very best for her; only she has such an unfortunate manner that it all seems to be no use.”

Mrs. Jennings had some equally amiable things to say about each remaining member of the family, but she spoke to a somewhat inattentive auditor. There are certain things which certain people are always sure to say, and Matthew, the physiologist, having already formed a diagnosis of his companion’s nature, was not much affected, one way or the other, by symptoms which only pointed to the existence of a mental condition neither novel nor interesting.

CHAPTER IV.

AT WILVERTON HORSE SHOW.

It so happened that, for three or four weeks in succession, Matthew Austin saw nothing more of the Freres. He did, it is true, during that interval receive several friendly notes from Hayes Park, one of which contained a request from Mrs. Frere that she might be allowed to see his flowers; but he was unable to be at home on the afternoon that she named, and Bush was deputed to do the honours in his absence. This was a task willingly undertaken by Mr. Bush, who obtained the consequent gratuity that he had anticipated, and who took an early opportunity of telling his master what a nice lady Mrs. Frere was.

"What I call one o' the hold sort, sir, and very glad I am as you should have a few patients among the real gentry. 'Ard work I don't say nothin' against, and I can do as 'ard a day's work myself as here and there a one, though I say it. But the labourer is worthy of his 'ire, whether 'tis a pore thirty shillin' a week or more like thirty pound—same as that there old Jennings makes during the winter time, they tell me—and 'twon't do you no manner of 'arm to be known as Mr. Frere's medical man, sir, you may depend."

"Well, I hope it won't," answered Matthew. "Did Mrs. Frere come alone?"

"She did, sir, and stop a long time, haskin' about this and that. Not that I begrudged it to her; for 'tis reelly a pleasure to talk to a lady as knows enough to set a proper value upon good gardenin'."

Well, there was no occasion to feel disappointed because Miss Frere had not seen fit to accompany her mother; nor, in truth, was Matthew's disappointment

more than momentary. He had other matters to occupy his thoughts than the study of a young woman who was something of a mystery to him, and an outbreak of low fever in the overcrowded slums of the town had latterly furnished him with as much as he could manage of that hard work upon which his gardener had bestowed a conditional approval. Nevertheless, it was not without some half-acknowledged hope of encountering Anne that he betook himself one afternoon to the Wilverton Autumn Horse Show, where, as he had learnt from the handbills, George Frere, Esq., D.L. and J.P., was to act as one of the judges. He had, to be sure, a more plausible excuse, inasmuch as he thought it might be necessary for him to purchase a second horse, and it was just as well to see what class of animal was likely to come into the market.

He saw various classes of animals unsuited to his purpose; he also saw a vast concourse of people, witnessed a pretty display of jumping, and recognized, in the ring beneath him, the broad back and the leather leggings of Mr. Frere; but he did not recognize anybody else, and he was already thinking about going home when he was accosted by a tall, fair-haired lady in a mackintosh (for the weather was showery and chilly), who said,—

“Please don’t cut me, Mr. Austin. If it is too much trouble to come and see us when you are asked, you might at least be equal to the effort of taking off your hat after you have been persistently bowed to at intervals for the last ten minutes.”

“I beg your pardon most humbly,” answered Matthew, with his hat in his hand; “I suppose it was because I was looking out for you so anxiously that I looked everywhere except in the right direction. It hasn’t been any fault of mine, I can assure you, that I have been obliged to decline your mother’s kind invitations. I have had my hands full ever since the day when I lunched with you, and this is the very first holiday I have allowed myself. Indeed, I am here more or less on business, for

I rather want to buy another horse. Do you, by any chance, know a sound horse when you see one?—because I don't."

Miss Frere shook her head.

"I am afraid I can't be of much assistance to you; still, I am acquainted with a good many of the horses here by reputation. Shall I walk round with you and point out the notoriously unsound ones?"

Matthew at once closed with this obliging offer, wondering a little why it had been made; but upon that point Miss Frere hastened to enlighten him in a manner more truthful than flattering.

"It was one word for you and two for myself," she interrupted his expressions of gratitude by saying. "I drove over with my father, who has left me to be taken care of by a number of horsey ladies. Hereabouts everybody becomes overpoweringly horsey in the autumn, and as I am not, I can't talk to them nor they to me. I will tell Maggie that you have been too busy to remember where Hayes Park is; but I am not sure that she will accept the excuse. At present she sets you down as a fair-weather—or rather a foul-weather—friend, and she talks of falling ill again, since that seems to be the only means of attracting you."

"I am glad to be spoken of as a friend of any description," Matthew declared. "You didn't treat me very much like a friend the last time that I saw you."

To this leading remark Miss Frere made no immediate reply. They had reached the sheds beneath which some of the horses were standing, and she was able to give him certain information respecting a few of them, which rendered negotiations with their owners superfluous. Moreover, while thus employed, she was accosted by various gentlemen of various ages, who evidently represented the squirearchy of the neighbourhood, and to whom, as it seemed to Matthew, she was barely civil. But when they moved once more towards the ring, where a competition was just then going on, she reverted abruptly to the previous subject.

"I am sorry if I was rude," said she; "I didn't mean to be; but I can't help it when I am shy, and I almost always do feel shy."

Anybody else would have protested that Miss Frere showed no symptoms of suffering from that foolish malady; but Matthew only remarked consideringly,—

"Yes, I suppose so; yours would be the sort of temperament that is permanently and constitutionally shy. Was it shyness that made you snub all those men who spoke to you just now, or do you dislike them?"

"I didn't know I had snubbed them. I don't dislike them in the least; but I have nothing to say to them, and I know they only speak to me out of politeness. You, and one or two others, are quite different; when you talk to people you make them feel as if you were really rather interested in them; and then you never attempt to suit your conversation to your company—which is an immense encouragement."

"An encouragement to whom or to what?" Matthew inquired.

"Oh, I was only trying to explain. But after all one can't very well explain, and it doesn't signify. Please don't imagine again that I intend to be rude to you though."

"All I imagined was that I had been rather rude—or, at all events, inquisitive—and that you thought it advisable to give me a gentle hint to that effect. I wasn't much mistaken, was I?"

There is a time and a place for everything, and the place to put embarrassing questions is assuredly not the narrow entrance to a ring, while a passage is being with difficulty forced through the crowd for a string of high-spirited hunters. Miss Frere, meditating upon her companion's query and the terms in which she should answer it, did not use her eyes as she ought to have done, and was consequently within an inch or two of being then and there put to eternal silence. Matthew was only just in time to throw his arms round her and pull her violently back. She saw the flash of the iron shoe that

whizzed close past her head; she heard that curious gasping groan from the bystanders which is always heard when a horse lashes out in a crowd; she was conscious of a general and precipitate movement of retreat which nearly swept her off her feet; but she was not frightened, and as soon as Matthew had relaxed his grasp of her she merely observed, smiling,—

“That was a rather near thing, wasn’t it?”

Matthew, for his part, had turned white to the lips.

“It was indeed!” he exclaimed. And then: “What nerve you have!”

“Well, the danger was over before I knew anything about it, you see. There wasn’t time to indulge in hysterics.”

“Oh, of course not; but what I mean is, that you are as calm and cool as possible now; most women would have been shaking all over. Because I presume you realize that, if that brute had caught you on the head, you would never have moved again.”

“Yes; and I don’t exactly want to die,” answered the girl musingly. “Though I often think that I don’t particularly care about living either. It doesn’t seem as if there was much use in it.”

“Oh, this won’t do at all!” said Matthew. “You are altogether out of sorts, or you wouldn’t talk such nonsense. Now, look here, Miss Frere; you have virtually told me already that something is the matter; will you be kind enough to treat me as a physician and tell me what it is? You will understand that I don’t ask out of mere curiosity. I think I can see that you want to tell somebody, and I think it is more than likely that you will feel the better for having done so.”

The girl smiled.

“Well, you are quite right; I did want to tell you,” she answered. “It is no secret either, for I am sure you cannot have driven all the way into Wilverton with Mrs. Jennings and remained in ignorance of it. Not that she knows everything.”

It soon appeared that Mrs. Jennings, so far from

knowing everything, had been quite mistaken as to her main facts. Spencer Frere had been guilty of no offence so heinous or so unpardonable as that of forgery ; but, on the other hand, there was little likelihood, his sister feared, that he would ever be pardoned. What he had done had been to incur heavy debts, the defrayal of which had seriously crippled his father's resources ; and, in addition to that, he had behaved rather badly to various friends of his, from whom he had at different times borrowed large sums of money. It was this latter delinquency which had brought about a final breach between him and his choleric parent. He had not confessed to it ; the truth had only leaked out by degrees ; there had been great difficulty in ascertaining the actual amount of his obligations, and still greater difficulty in inducing his creditors to accept their due. Moreover, Spencer, when upbraided for his dishonourable conduct, had neither expressed nor, apparently, felt the slightest remorse. He had made light of the whole matter, declaring that other fellows had only done for him what he would have done for them had their positions been reversed.

"And so," concluded Anne, "it ended, as I always foresaw that it would end, in his being turned adrift and told never to show his face at Hayes Park again. It sounds cruel ; but without knowing Spencer you can hardly understand what provocation my father had. I don't think it was saying too much to say that he had disgraced himself and disgraced us all."

"Still, some door of repentance may have been left open for him ; and I suppose he wasn't sent out to fight his way through the world absolutely penniless ?"

"No ; not absolutely. But Spencer is one of those people who literally can't help spending any money that they may have in their pockets, and as for doors of repentance—well, I don't know ; but I am afraid that he will never try very hard to squeeze through a narrow door so long as he can keep body and soul together in liberty outside."

"And what has become of him?"

Anne glanced at her interlocutor and hesitated.

"I ought to have mentioned," said she, "that we were all strictly forbidden to hold any communication with him."

Matthew drew his own conclusions, but was discreet enough to refrain from giving utterance to them. He merely remarked,—

"I see now what you meant by incurable troubles, and I must admit that my panacea does not apply quite as well to this one as to most. I suppose you are very fond of your brother?"

"Yes; he is the one nearest to me in age, and we were always together as children. Besides, he isn't really as bad as they think. It was always his way to make himself out worse than he really was—I don't know why."

"Well," said Matthew, "I see no reason in the world why everything shouldn't come right with time and patience. From what you tell me, I should say that your brother stood somewhat in need of a sharp lesson, and I doubt whether your father is anything like as stern and inexorable as mine was."

He narrated the story of his own family quarrel, to which Anne listened with a melancholy smile.

"The only difference between the two cases," she remarked, "is that you are you and that Spencer is Spencer. Of course there is the further detail of your having been in the right, while Spencer was in the wrong; but that doesn't affect the question of pardon much. It isn't that my father is inexorable, but that he can't afford to be ruined, and he is justified in saying that he can't trust Spencer. If a reconciliation could be arranged to-morrow, it would be the same old story over again. That is why I have only just enough of hope left to make me thoroughly miserable."

"Would you be less miserable if you had none?"

"Perhaps. My mother, I am sure, has none, and she is resigned. As you were saying the other day, a time comes when one ceases to mourn for one's dead."

"Don't be bitter about it," said Matthew, answering her thought rather than her words. "You have one kind of temperament, your mother has another, and your father has a third. We are what we are—all of us—and we didn't make ourselves."

"I am not bitter," the girl declared; "I don't blame them. Only it is rather hard never to be allowed even to mention Spencer's name to anybody."

"You can mention him to me as often as you like. I haven't much comfort to offer you, beyond the customary commonplaces, but I know what a relief it is to be able to talk about one's troubles and anxieties."

It might have struck him as somewhat strange that she should select a comparative stranger for her confidant had he been less habituated to receiving confidences; but from the days of his boyhood people had let him into their secrets, knowing instinctively that he was both safe and sympathetic.

"What do you mean by the customary commonplaces?" Anne asked. "Do you mean that there is nothing to be done but to trust to time and the chapter of accidents?"

"Is there anything else to be done? You haven't told me where your brother is or what he is doing."

She looked down, drilling holes in the moist earth with the point of her umbrella. Perhaps she would have given him the information that he required if their interview had been protracted for a few more minutes; but before she could make up her mind to speak, Mr. Frere bustled up, saying,—

"Now, Anne, if you're ready, we may as well be off. They tell me I shan't be wanted after this, and I don't want to get a chill driving home, and be laid up for six weeks.—Well, Austin, what have you been doing with yourself all this long time? I can't say I've been anxious to see you professionally—though I expect I shall have to say so before I'm much older—but you might have looked us up in a non-professional way. I hope my daughter has been scolding you."

He hurried away, without waiting for a reply, and took his daughter with him, while Matthew bent his steps homewards, forgetful of the harness horses that he had intended to inspect. Matthew, as has already been mentioned, was not susceptible, nor did it occur to him to draw inferences which many a man would have drawn from the compliment just paid to him by Miss Frere. Nevertheless, it is probable that he was at that moment not very far from falling in love for the first time in his active, dreamy, speculative life, and the probability is not lessened by the circumstance that all he said to himself was,—

“ I must try and find time to see that girl again soon. She has got into a morbid condition which paves the way for all manner of diseases.”

CHAPTER V.

A FRESH PATIENT.

THE often noticed and often resented unwillingness of doctors to multiply visits after the condition of a patient has been pronounced hopeless is probably not due to that lack of humanity which is apt to be laid to their charge. Their mission is to heal ; and from the moment that they know it to be out of their power to fulfil that mission they not unnaturally shrink from wasting their own time and other people's money—perhaps also lose interest in a case which, so far as they are medically concerned, has already taken its place amongst bygone experiences. It may have been some quasi-professional feeling of this sort that rendered Matthew Austin, than whom a kinder-hearted man never breathed, a little reluctant to seek occasion for a second private interview with Miss Frere. He now knew why she looked so sad, and, although he was sincerely sorry for her, he did not see what he could possibly do to help her. This brother (with whom it was easy to guess that she was keeping up a clandestine correspondence) was evidently a scapegrace. He might, under the chastening influence of adversity, reform, and at some future date his father might possibly be interceded with ; but for the present, as she herself seemed to be fully aware, the only service that could be rendered to him was to supply him with money, which he would doubtless hasten to expend in a manner not to his own advantage.

As regards Anne herself, it is quite true that, while she had been talking to him at the horse show, and while he had been admiring her courage and her straightforward simplicity, as well as her personal beauty, Matthew had not been very far removed from falling in love

with her ; but, since Matthew was very far removed indeed from suspecting a fact which only dawned upon him at a much later period of his life, he did not at the time experience anything of a lover's eagerness to see her again. Added to which, he had his work to attend to.

Nevertheless, he conscientiously devoted his first free afternoon to driving over to Hayes Park in order to pay his respects, and shortly after he had been admitted into Mrs. Frere's presence there came a sound of rushing footsteps outside, followed by the tempestuous entrance of Maggie, who hastened to state breathlessly that she had finished her lessons.

"My dear child," remonstrated Mrs. Frere, "are you quite sure that Fräulein Backfisch gave you leave to come down? It seems very early for you to have done your day's work."

Some light was thrown upon the customary standard of discipline maintained in the Frere household by Maggie's reply.

"Oh yes! I think she did ; but it does take her such a long time to say anything, and I told her I *must* go, because the medicine-man had come at last.—We always call you the medicine-man now," Maggie continued explanatorily, addressing herself to Matthew, of whose hand she had taken possession. "It sounds rather a nasty sort of name, but Anne says it has nothing to do with powders or black draughts."

"Everybody knows that the greatest compliment you can pay a man is to give him a nickname," Matthew said. "I rather like mine, and I hope it may help you to bear in mind that I have something to do besides visiting young ladies who don't require medicine. Your sister told me I was in your black books because I hadn't been to see you since your recovery."

"It wasn't me more than mamma and Anne," Maggie returned. "You lunched here ever so long ago, and people who have been to luncheon or dinner ought always to call afterwards. Mamma said so, and she wondered why you hadn't done it."

Mrs. Frere was not much disconcerted. She merely remarked,—

“Maggie has been an *enfant terrible* from her cradle. One would think that at the age of fourteen she ought to be growing out of it ; but, after all, one likes to keep them young as long as one can. I will forgive you for not having called, Mr. Austin, if you will forgive me for having said that you were neglecting your duties. Now I’m going to ring for tea.”

But it was intimated to Matthew that before he had his tea he really must come round to the stableyard and inspect a litter of retriever puppies which Maggie was eager to exhibit to him, and he was the more willing to comply with this request because he had noticed that Mrs. Frere had been busily engaged in writing letters when he was announced.

If it be a compliment to a man to have a nickname conferred upon him, it is a still greater compliment to be admitted into the unreserved confidence of his juniors. Maggie had many things to say to her friend, some of which were extremely amusing to him, though perhaps they might not be found equally so by the general reader. The puppies were duly admired, the sadly empty stables were explored, a visit was paid to the pigs, and it was under consideration whether there would not be just time to go and see the cows milked when Miss Frere suddenly appeared upon the scene to put a summary veto upon any such project. Miss Frere, it seemed, was the emissary of Fräulein Backfisch, who had been justly incensed by her pupil’s unceremonious flight, and who would have come out to claim her in person had she not been afraid of catching cold.

Maggie had inherited her share of the family good nature and philosophy. She only sighed heavily and said,—

“Horrid old beast ! All right, then ; I’ll go in. But you must come again soon ; and please come on a Saturday, if you can, because Saturdays are half holidays. I can always get rid of Backfisch by telling her that I

want to go out for a walk. She hates fresh air, and her corns hurt her when she has to put on thick boots."

Nobody, except those rare persons who recollect what they themselves were in their early years, can tell how much of ignorance and how much of mischievous intent goes to constitute an *enfant terrible*. It was with an air of perfect innocence that Maggie, lingering for a moment over her adieux, added,—

"Do you know, I have been thinking how nice it would be if you were to marry Anne. I wish you would! She likes you awfully, and she doesn't generally like men. Do think of it!"

"I will give the subject serious consideration," answered Matthew composedly (though he could not help reddening a little). "Meanwhile, I should advise you to be off as quickly as you can and bestow serious consideration upon your own business. If I were Fräulein Backfisch, you would have a bad five minutes to look forward to, I can tell you."

Now, there was really nothing in this piece of childish impertinence that ought to have caused annoyance to two sensible persons; but Anne had evidently been vexed either by it or by something in the tone of Matthew's rejoinder; for as soon as Maggie had vanished, she said, rather stiffly and distantly,—

"You will find tea ready in the drawing-room, I believe. I must say good-bye, as I have to get down to the village and back before dark."

"You will hardly manage that," Matthew observed. "We are going to have rain, too, presently. Is it absolutely necessary for you to go to the village this afternoon?"

"It isn't absolutely necessary," answered the girl; "but I want a walk, and I don't mind rain. I won't keep you standing any longer out here in the cold though."

The air was in truth raw, with that moist, penetrating chill which accompanies the gales and rains of early winter; low, ragged clouds were being driven across the grey sky from the south-eastward by a wind which was rising in

gusts and hurrying the fallen leaves before it, and there was a forlorn look about the tall figure which was half turned away from him that moved Matthew with a sudden feeling of intense compassion. She seemed to be so utterly alone.

"It is you who choose to be left out in the cold," he said. "Why should you choose what no human being likes? I was in hopes that, if I saw you to-day, you would go on with what you were telling me the last time we met."

"Oh, thank you," answered Anne in a constrained voice, "but I think I told you all there was to tell—all I had a right to tell, anyhow. Afterwards I was rather sorry that I had said so much. Only I was sure you must have heard a garbled version of the story from Mrs. Jennings. Please don't look so sorrowful about it; there is a skeleton in almost every family, I suppose."

It was plain that she was under the influence of one of those shy moods to which she had made allusion, and that sympathy would not be welcomed by her at that especial moment. Matthew, understanding this, wisely allowed her to go her way without much further parley, and returned to Mrs. Frere, whom he found cosily established between the tea-table and the fire. It was but a word here and there of Mrs. Frere's cheerful prattle that reached his intelligence, while, as usual, only a very few of his occasional absent-minded remarks reached her hearing. This, however, did not prevent them from spending a pleasant half-hour together, nor from enjoying one another's society.

"It's a queer thing," thought Matthew to himself, as he climbed into his dog-cart and gave the reins a shake, "that the faculty of speech should help us so little towards mutual comprehension. I couldn't, for the life of me, say what that dear old lady has been talking about all this time; but I know just exactly what she is and how she feels. There can't be any doubt that she takes a far saner and more reasonable view of existence than her daughter does, and that makes one

like her—though her daughter is probably worth a hundred of her.”

Without any consciousness of being so, he was a trifle irritated with Anne. He had already forgotten Maggie's indiscretion, and, even if he had remembered it, would not have ascribed the elder sister's change of manner to that cause. The waywardness of women, towards which he was, as a rule, lenient enough, knowing their physical constitution and the inevitable influences of the body upon the mind, did not in this instance represent itself to him as an excuse; and perhaps the circumstance that it did not might have warned him that he had ceased to regard Anne Frere as a woman like other women. But he was much more given to the study of his fellow-beings than to self-scrutiny, so that he reached home in what, for him, was almost a bad humour.

There was a note lying on his study table—a note which, had he but known it as he carelessly tore the flap of the envelope with his forefinger, was to prove the first word of a new and important chapter in his life. It certainly bore no outward indication of being so portentous a document, for it merely stated, in the third person, that Lady Sara Murray was anxious to consult Mr. Austin, and would be obliged if he would kindly call upon her at the Royal Hotel as soon as he could spare time. He shrugged his shoulders and made a grimace, glancing at the gold monogram and the thick paper, which exhaled a faint perfume of that detestable scent known as “white rose”—probably so called because, among all the white roses that bloom, not one smells in the very least like it.

“Some fashionable lady who is suffering from late hours and over-nourishment and want of exercise,” he muttered. “More in Jennings's line than mine, I suspect. Well, I had better go round and see her, since she has been pleased to send for me; most likely one visit will suffice.”

But Lady Sara Murray was by no means the sort of

person that he had hastily taken her for: that much he discovered very soon after he had walked to the Royal Hotel and had been ushered into the stuffy little gas-lighted sitting-room occupied by her ladyship. Fashionable she might be, and doubtless was; but she was genuinely ill. In fact, she had such a complication of maladies that she established an immediate claim upon his regard with which her personality had nothing whatsoever to do.

Her personality, however, was not unpleasing. She was a woman of between forty and fifty—nearer fifty than forty, perhaps—and, notwithstanding her ruined complexion and sunken cheeks, it was easy to see that she had been handsome once upon a time. Her hair, like her complexion, had faded; it was now of an indeterminate hue and was turning grey at the temples; but her small, slightly aquiline nose and her soft, dark-brown eyes had lost little of their beauty, while her mouth, though somewhat spoilt in shape by lines of age and suffering, could still smile very pleasantly. As a matter of fact, Lady Sara had driven not a few members of the opposite sex to the verge of temporary despair in days long past and forgotten.

Matthew was not long in discovering that this poor lady would never be anything but an invalid; for rheumatic gout had her in its grip, and although the Wilverton waters might, and probably would, do something for her, the enemy was too firmly established to be permanently dislodged. As for the asthma and the bronchial troubles with which she was likewise afflicted, treatment had a chance of success there, and she seemed to have such a wretched constitution that to set her on her legs again, even for a few years, would be quite a triumph. So interesting, indeed, was she as a patient, that the young doctor had been examining and questioning her for a good half-hour before he heeded or replied to certain items of information which she had bestowed upon him parenthetically.

“You were saying that you know my brother,” he

remarked at length, after jotting down some notes in his pocket-book. "I scarcely ever see Godfrey; but I am always glad to hear of him, and I'm sure it was very good of him to mention my name to you."

Lady Sara laughed: she had a low, musical laugh, and a gently modulated voice, he noticed.

"That means that you are grateful to him for having sent you such a wreck to patch up," she observed. "Sir Godfrey warned me that you were a social recluse, and that you didn't care to make fresh acquaintances unless they had something terrible the matter with them. I hope you think I have enough the matter with me!"

"You will have to take very great care of yourself and do just what I tell you," answered Matthew seriously. "I hope that, if you will consent to do that, you will be feeling much better soon, and in a few weeks' time you may begin to take the waters. But for the present, you see, it is most important——"

"Oh yes, I know," she interrupted a little impatiently. "Of course I shall obey your orders, and you can't realize half as keenly as I do how important it is that I should live a little longer. When once my daughter is married, and settled in a home of her own, I dare say I shall begin to disregard physicians—whose orders, to tell you the truth, haven't helped me much hitherto. Now, if you are not in a great hurry, perhaps you wouldn't mind telling me who lives here and what amusements there are for a girl of not quite eighteen. I suppose it is a desperately dull place?"

Matthew was bound to admit that Wilverton was neither Cannes nor Homburg.

"Still," he said, "there is a certain amount of gaiety during the winter season, I believe—balls at the Assembly Rooms and dances at private houses and so on."

"Oh, I don't mean balls and dances," Lady Sara told him. "Lilian is not out yet, and I don't wish her to make a provincial *debut*. But if there were a few nice people in the neighbourhood, a few girls of her own age,

whom she could associate with, that would be something."

Matthew at once thought of the Freres, and was about to mention their name, when he was momentarily struck dumb by the entrance of the most beautiful human being whom he had ever beheld in his life. That was his impression of Lilian Murray at the time, and he still maintains its accuracy. Possibly she may not be quite as beautiful now as she was then, although many people would doubtless declare her to be more so ; it is a question of individual taste. There is a kind of beauty which belongs only to girlhood—or rather childhood—and that, of course, is necessarily transient.

But the beauty which has form, feature, and colouring for its constituent elements Lilian possessed, and possesses, almost in perfection. Very few women have ever been blessed with a complexion like hers—a complexion comparable only to the petals of a dog-rose ; not many can boast of a figure in which the most exacting sculptor would find it hard to point out a defect ; not above many shoulders is the head of the Capitoline Venus delicately poised, nor is wavy hair of that golden-copper tinge often seen. Red-brown eyes are not usually admired, but Lilian's, which were of that shade, harmonized with her hair, and were so softened by long, curved lashes that no one could have wished to improve upon their colour.

For the rest, she did not appear to be conscious of her loveliness or to exult over the silent, unmistakable homage rendered thereto by an amazed country doctor. She was evidently rather shy, and took little part in the conversation which was resumed after she had seated herself on a footstool beside her mother's sofa. But Matthew, who watched her during the ensuing five minutes, and saw how anxiously she was watching him, was not surprised that she summoned up courage to follow him out on to the landing, when he had taken his leave. He answered her quick questions as encouragingly as honesty would permit. Lady Sara would

be almost sure to benefit by the baths, he said ; he certainly thought that her present sufferings might be much alleviated ; he had every reason to believe that, if she could be kept from catching cold, and if the tendency to bronchitis could be checked, her general health would improve.

" But that doesn't mean getting quite well," the girl remarked in a disappointed voice.

" It doesn't mean that, of course ; doctors are not fond of promising more than they are sure of being able to perform. My business just now is to try and make your mother better ; after we have advanced a few steps we may begin to look further forward."

The girl did not seem to think this very satisfactory. She was silent for a moment, and then asked all of a sudden, with a mixture of temerity and timidity which he afterwards found to be characteristic of her,—

" Don't you hate being a doctor ?"

" No, I like it," he answered, laughing. " Otherwise I shouldn't be one."

" Yes, Sir Godfrey said it was your own choice and that he couldn't understand it. Nor can I ; I should have thought it was a horrid occupation. It isn't as if doctors ever did people any good. Mamma has had dozens ; but she only gets worse and worse."

The tears that had gathered in the girl's eyes and the appealing expression of her quivering lips atoned for her petulance.

" Oh, you must not be downhearted," Matthew said ; " we medical men are not quite such a useless class as you think, and, though it does not become me to boast, I may tell you for your comfort that I have successfully treated much worse cases than Lady Sara's. Only you must not ask us to perform miracles."

She surveyed him consideringly for a few seconds, and then smiled.

" Will you come again soon ?" she asked.

" I will come the day after to-morrow in any case," he replied, " and before that if you send for me."

Thereupon he withdrew ; and if, in the course of his long, solitary evening, he thought more frequently of Lilian Murray than of Anne Frere, there was nothing surprising in that. To the appreciative and dispassionate bystander an exquisitely beautiful child must always be a more pleasing subject for retrospective study than a woman whose claims to good looks fall decidedly short of that lofty level, and whose behaviour has been a little bit unreasonable into the bargain. Moreover, as was remarked at the beginning of this chapter, it is painful and discouraging to have to deal with people to whom no practical assistance can be given.

CHAPTER VI.

ANNE PREFERS SOLITUDE.

It would be doing Matthew Austin a gross injustice to assert that he took more trouble about Lady Sara Murray than he would have taken about any other woman similarly afflicted because she happened to be the mother of an incomparably beautiful child ; but he certainly did take a great deal of trouble to render her more easy and comfortable, and the gratitude of the incomparably beautiful child was, to say the least of it, an agreeable reward for his pains. Not in his medical capacity alone did he make himself serviceable to these friendless and forlorn ladies. It was he who (having ascertained that expenditure was a matter which they had to consider) removed them, without any fuss or difficulty, from the costly discomfort of the Royal Hotel into quiet, sunny lodgings in Prospect Place ; it was he who undertook to provide them, at a very moderate outlay, with the trained nurse who was essential to the invalid's well-being, and his conservatories supplied them daily with the flowers that brightened their little drawing-room.

"Lilian says you told her not to ask for miracles," Lady Sara remarked one day ; "but you seem to be one of those extraordinary people who give a great deal more than they have been asked for. If you go on as you have begun, I believe you will be ordering me to take a long walk every morning before you have done with me. Isn't that a part of the regular course of water-drinkers ?"

It was not a course which was likely to be ever prescribed for that poor crippled water-drinker ; still, at the end of a week or ten days she had greatly improved both in health and spirits ; so that she felt able to indulge in such occasional mild jocularities.

Indeed, it was rather as a friend than as a professional adviser that Mr. Austin was received in those modest apartments. Perhaps his visits were more frequent than was necessary ; assuredly he made no note of them in his carelessly-kept books. There was generally some excuse for looking in on his way home, after the labours of the day, and the excuse of refreshing himself by a chat with Lilian was one which he could allege both inwardly and openly without *arrière pensée*. He was fond of children, and Lilian, notwithstanding her seventeen or eighteen years, was nothing but a child. Her shyness—a mere childish shyness, which had no affinity with Anne Frere's constitutional reserve—speedily wore off ; she told Matthew quite frankly that she liked him, and his successful treatment of her mother, so far as it had gone, had inspired her with an implicit confidence in him upon which he could not find it in his heart to throw cold water. Often, while he sat gazing at her, returning haphazard replies to the quick questions with which it was her habit to ply him, he wondered what her future would be, and felt a quasi-paternal jealousy of the man to whom she was destined to belong. Probably, he thought, she would make a great match ; probably her mother had the intention and the ability to arrange such a match for her. But he did not know whether Lady Sara Murray was the daughter of a duke or of an impoverished Irish peer, and had never had the curiosity to inquire ; for human beings interested him simply and solely as human beings, and with regard to conventional degrees of rank he was a Radical of the Radicals—differing in that respect from certain eloquent and more prominent demagogues whom we all know of.

Still, without being either a demagogue or a tuft-hunter, one really ought to know who is who ; and Mr. Frere, for one, was not destitute of the knowledge which all ladies and most gentlemen have at their fingers' ends.

“ So poor Lady Sara Murray has come down here for the winter, I'm told,” said he, chancing upon Matthew in the County Club one frosty evening. “ And you've

annexed her, eh? Very glad of it! One more unfortunate rescued from the clutches of that useless old Jennings. She's a deplorable wreck, they say. Dear me, how time does fly! It doesn't seem like more than a generation ago that I used to admire her from a respectful distance at Kingsbridge House—wouldn't deign to look at me, of course. That was in the old Lord Kingsbridge's time, before the crash came, you know."

"I never heard of Lord Kingsbridge, and I didn't know there had been a crash," Matthew said; "but I have been wondering whether I might beg Mrs. Frere to call on Lady Sara. She and her daughter are rather lonely, I am afraid; so that it would be a real act of kindness to take some notice of them."

"Oh, my wife will call with the greatest pleasure," Mr. Frere answered. "At least, I should think she would; but you had better ask her yourself, because women have such queer prejudices. The fact is that poor old Lord Kingsbridge's children were a baddish lot. The young man—not that he's young any longer—played the very deuce, ruined the property and had to go through the Bankruptcy Court; and his brothers were no better than he was. Then there was Lady Laura Keane, Lady Sara's sister, who bolted with a groom and was divorced—a nasty business. There's nothing against Lady Sara, though, that I know of. Married Murray in the Diplomatic Service, and was left very poorly provided for when he died, I believe. She might have married anybody at one time, but waited too long, I suppose, as they often do. Well, now, look here, Austin; why not come home with me and take pot-luck? Then you can have a talk with Mrs. Frere, who will be delighted to see you. You're such a difficult fellow to get hold of nowadays that you'll become priceless presently. How long is it since you last crossed the threshold of this club, I wonder?"

It was not much time that Matthew had to spare for frequenting that establishment, nor of late had he been able to bestow a thought upon social obligations. His

practice was rapidly increasing; winter visitors had arrived in large numbers; he had been well spoken of by influential persons; possibly—though he was not aware of it—his intimacy with a lady of title and his relationship to a baronet may have helped to swell the list of his patients. But he knew of no reason why he should not accept Mr. Frere's invitation, and he willingly did so, only adding that he would have to go home first to change his clothes and see whether there were any messages for him.

Mr. Frere, who liked company, seldom went into Wilverton without bringing some stray man or other back to dinner from the club; so that his wife was always prepared to receive an impromptu guest. When Matthew entered her drawing-room about two hours later, she said it was charming of him to come and enliven their solitude, and looked as if she meant what she said; but it struck him at once that Anne, who approached with slow steps from the other end of the long room, was not quite equally charmed. Although she smiled upon him as she shook hands, and had no longer the air of holding herself aloof which had vexed him on the occasion of their last meeting, his faculty for quick observation told him immediately that she was wishing him away. He was momentarily hurt, feeling that he had done nothing to forfeit the friendship which, only a short time before, she had seemed so willing to extend to him; but he forgave her as soon as he noticed the dark circles under her eyes and perceived that she was nervous and out of sorts. Innumerable causes suffice to throw the complicated human machine out of gear, and he had not the vanity to imagine that he could have been one of them in this instance. Very likely she had had bad news of her brother, and did not want to be troubled with entertaining a guest while she thought it over. Or possibly she was simply suffering from a headache. At all events, he resolved to display practical sympathy by troubling her as little as he could help.

With Mrs. Frere at his elbow, it was easy enough to

avoid making conversational demands upon anybody else. His hostess was much interested in Lady Sara Murray, whom she remembered to have met in the days of her youth, and whom she declared to be the only decent member of a family whose conduct had not been precisely conspicuous for decency. There was so much to be said about Lord Kingsbridge and the unfortunate Lady Laura Keane, and one set of reminiscences led by such an easy process of transition to another set, that dinner was half over before Mrs. Frere thought of inquiring what sort of a girl Lilian was.

"Well, I am very glad to hear that," she said good-naturedly, when Matthew had drawn a vivid and enthusiastic portrait of the young lady in question. "People may say that beauty is no use in these days without money, but my belief is that men always have been, and always will be, attracted by it. If she is anything like what her mother used to be, she ought to marry much better than her mother did. Take care that you don't lose your own heart to her, that's all." Then she put up her glasses, contemplated her neighbour and exclaimed, "My dear Mr. Austin, you are positively blushing! Anne, do look at Mr. Austin! Is he turning pink, or is it only the rose-coloured shades on the candles?"

Anne smiled very slightly, but returned no answer; Mr. Frere burst into a loud laugh, while Fräulein Backfisch, the remaining member of the party, gazed modestly down at her plate. Fräulein Backfisch had rather strict notions upon the subject of propriety, and had already been a good deal scandalized by the freedom with which Lady Laura Keane's escapades had been discussed.

There are moments when kind-hearted, thick-skinned people tempt their less favoured fellow-creatures to do or say something extremely unpleasant to them; but Matthew, whose heart was as kind as his hostess's, if his skin, unluckily for himself, was not quite so thick, displayed no resentment. He only laughed and said,—

"You are enough to make anybody blush, Mrs. Frere.

I shall expect to be accused of nourishing a secret and hopeless passion for your daughter Maggie next. By the way, am I to be allowed to see Miss Maggie this evening?"

The change of subject proved effectual, and Maggie, when she came down to dessert, was agreeably loquacious; but Matthew did not enjoy himself very much during the interim. Why, he wondered for the hundredth time, cannot women understand that a doctor, when engaged upon professional duties, ceases to be a man, just as a parson does when similarly employed? It is because they will not realize this that silly little jokes are made which are sometimes taken in earnest, and which are apt, in the long run, to turn out destructive of all comfort. To be sure, it was scarcely in his professional character that he had asked Mrs. Frere to call upon the Murrays and had described Lilian in terms of such fervid admiration; still, if Lady Sara had not been ill, he would never have had anything to do with her or her daughter.

Anne, who had only opened her lips once or twice from first to last, save for the purpose of putting food between them—and who, as he observed, had not opened them very often for that purpose—had disappeared by the time that Mr. Frere suffered him to leave the port and return to the drawing-room. She was not feeling very well, her mother said, and had gone upstairs.

"I suggested," added Mrs. Frere, "that, having you on the spot, she might as well consult you; but Anne always declares that solitude is her best medicine. Fortunately, perhaps, considering that she is fated to have so much of it, poor dear! Well, now, George, what shall we do to amuse Mr. Austin? I suppose he wouldn't care to play dummy whist?"

"I shouldn't think he would," answered the old gentleman, with his back to the fire. "I expect he would much rather let you go to bed, and come to my den for a quiet smoke."

"Do what? revoke?" asked Mrs. Frere. "Now,

George, you know very well that I never did such a thing in my life."

Her husband, a trifle jocose after his three glasses of port, placed a hand on each side of his mouth and shouted in a stentorian voice,—

"Lucy, ahoy! I did *not* say that you would revoke; I said that you had better go off to bed and let me and Mr. Austin smoke."

Mrs. Frere raised her pretty little hands to her ears and then struck at him with her fan.

"Isn't he rude?" she exclaimed. "This comes of living down in the country from year's end to year's end. His manners deteriorate every day. Go away, then, both of you. I am not quite ready for bed yet, but I won't keep you from your cigars."

But Matthew protested, truthfully as well as politely, that he would much prefer half an hour's chat with Mrs. Frere to a cigar. He would have to go in about half an hour, he added, because it was by no means certain that he might not find some urgent summons awaiting him on his return home. So he seated himself near the pretty old lady, whose prettiness and charm were still rather those that belong to youth than to age, while her husband sank into an easy-chair on the opposite side of the fire and was soon fast asleep.

It was pleasant and soothing even to look at Mrs. Frere as she sat there, with all her costly little knick-knacks, refinements, and luxuries around her, and still more so to listen to her while she enlarged complacently upon the inconveniences and discomforts of pauperism. She had been purchasing an additional supply of bulbs, she said, but had been obliged to deny herself some of the newer and more expensive varieties. "One can't attempt to go in for competition with one's wealthy friends when one's purse is all but empty and the end of the year is still so far off." Then she related how Harry had written in the best of spirits, and how she hoped that, sooner or later, Lord This or Lord That would secure a staff appointment for him. Dick, it appeared,

had recently got into trouble at Windsor Fair, and had suffered the extreme penalty of school law in consequence. "But he seems to be rather proud of his achievements than otherwise, and I am sure flogging must be good for boys. Such a mistake to try and abolish it, don't you think so? Though I can't say I should like it myself." Anne and Maggie also came in for their share of mention and more or less compassionate discussion; but to her eldest son she did not allude even remotely. Yet she must have guessed that her hearer had by this time been made at least aware of the existence of that black sheep.

Her hearer, nursing his knee and gazing at her with his head a little on one side, was thinking what an enviable, not to say admirable, specimen of the human genus she was. Nobody could call her selfish; she was evidently wrapped up in her children, and quite unsuspecting that other people might be bored by long disquisitions upon their several perfections and imperfections; still it could be surmised that her buoyant temperament would tide her comfortably over any calamity that might be in store for them or her. She was one of those thrice happy few who are content to let things happen to them, who do not attempt to control the course of events very much, who have but a slight sense of personal responsibility, and who are almost incomprehensible to the nervous and anxious among their fellow-beings. Mrs. Frere was not at all incomprehensible to Matthew; but he could easily believe that she might be that, and provoking into the bargain, to her daughter. The more he saw of this really delightful and amiable family, the more he realized the complete isolation in which one member of it must necessarily dwell.

"Of course it is her own fault," he mused; "but one can no more help faults of that kind than one can help being tall or short, fat or thin."

When you come to think of it, the number of things that can be helped is quite astonishingly small. Mat-

threw was thinking of this when the butler came in to tell him that his dog-cart was at the door, and when Mr. Frere, waking up with a start, rubbed his hands and declared that there was snow in the air. He was thinking of it while he said good-night to his entertainers and absolutely refused to let the old gentleman accompany him into the hall; he continued to think of it after he had struggled into his heavy overcoat and had emerged into the starry night. Some snow had actually fallen while he had been sitting by the warm fireside, and the ground was thinly powdered with it; but the clouds had now dispersed and a hard frost had set in. Away went the mare with a loose rein, notwithstanding the outspoken remonstrances of the groom; her heedless driver was occupied with other problems than that of keeping her upon her legs, and perhaps, after all, she was better able to take care of herself than he was to take care of her.

Of what avail, indeed, are knowledge, experience, good will, salutary precautions? The same stupid blunders are committed over and over again, as generation follows generation; sin and disease remain unconquered; ninety-nine mortals out of every hundred act in obedience to inherited tendencies; if young men see fit to go to the deuce, if young women choose to fret vainly over the ruin of their brothers, and if fathers deem it their duty to be stern and implacable, the philosophic mind can only console itself with the reflection that there is a bright as well as a dark side to existence. Nevertheless, it is not easy to sit still and make no sort of effort, however small, towards brightening dark places.

Now, it came to pass that, while Matthew was thus cogitating, he reached a place where the darkness in which he had hitherto been travelling was brightened by the rays of the gas-lamps which the Wilverton Local Board had set up, at rare intervals, on the outskirts of their town; and these, falling upon the buttons of a military overcoat, drew his attention to the wearer thereof. A soldier in cavalry uniform is not an everyday sight in those parts; still, Matthew's curiosity

would doubtless have been satisfied by a passing glance had not this soldier and his female companion drawn back somewhat hastily on the approach of the dog-cart. They did not draw back quite hastily enough. The female companions of private soldiers do not generally appear in dresses of the material and colour worn by Miss Frere at dinner, nor is it very much their habit to sally forth at night in thin shoes and long, fur-trimmed opera-cloaks. Matthew involuntarily drew rein; but his impulse was but momentary, and he immediately laid his whip across the flanks of the mare, who resented such uncalled-for treatment by throwing herself into her collar, whisking her tail, and breaking into a gallop.

"So that's it, is it?" thought he to himself, as he narrowly avoided collision with the next lamp-post. "Well, the fellow might do worse than go in for soldiering, and I have no business to spy upon her. All the same, he ought to be ashamed of asking her to come out, all by herself, in the middle of the night; and she risks catching her death of cold if she runs no other risk. At least, he will see her safe home, I suppose. I wonder whether she knew that I recognized her? Anyhow, I hope she knows that I shall not betray her."

But that, as it happened, was exactly what Miss Frere did not know.

CHAPTER VII.

A LITTLE ESCAPEDE.

THE two persons whom Matthew had left standing upon the footpath just outside Wilverton remained silent for a moment or two, while they watched the rapidly retreating dog-cart. Then the man in the military overcoat remarked,—

“Not much of a coachman, that chap. I didn’t recognize his face; do you know who he is?”

“Oh yes, indeed I do,” sighed his companion. “He is Mr. Austin, the new doctor, who, as I told you, has been dining with us this evening; and the worst of it is that I am quite certain he saw me.”

The other laughed.

“What a popular doctor he will be for the next few weeks! Miss Frere sneaking out in the dead of the night to meet an unknown Tommy Atkins alone!—it can’t be every day that he gets such a first-rate bit of scandal as that to retail to the old women. This is what comes of being so reckless.”

“But you told me to meet you here, Spencer,” pleaded Anne reproachfully; “you said it was the only way.”

“Oh no, my dear girl; excuse me, it was you who said that. I, having nothing to lose and precious little to gain, should have been game to walk up to the front door and ring the bell. Besides which, I mentioned that a letter, enclosing a cheque or postal order, would answer all immediate purposes.”

“Don’t talk like that! What pleasure can it give you to hurt me, when the time is so short and we may not see each other again for months or years?”

He shrugged his shoulders. He was a tall, good-look-

ing young man, with a heavy, fair moustache. His hair was plastered down in a wave over his forehead and his cap was jauntily set on one side, after the fashion affected by the branch of the service to which he belonged. A close observer might have guessed that he was a gentleman by birth; but he seemed to have assimilated the outward aspect of his fellows.

"I talk like what I am," he declared; "if you expect me to be what I once was, you expect an impossibility. People who associate with brutes become brutes—there's no help for it—and you can't have the slightest idea what brutes those fellows are. Fine soldiers too, and as plucky as you like; but—well, you must live amongst them to know what they really are. If I hadn't a very fair prospect of being promoted to sergeant before long I should desert."

"But you have that prospect, and you say the colonel is inclined to do all he can for you. You won't be so crazy as to throw away your only chance, will you, Spencer?" asked Anne anxiously.

"Oh, I don't suppose I shall desert. For one thing, it wouldn't be easy, and for another thing I should feel that I had defrauded myself by having gone through this hell upon earth without compensation. Still, there are moments when one longs to take a short cut to the real hell—if there is such a place—and have done with it. A week of cheap debauchery, and then a jump into the canal or over a railway bridge in front of the express—painful for one's family, of course; but one's family would probably survive the shock."

Anne did not give utterance to the apprehensive cry which may have been expected of her. She knew her brother, and was well aware that, although he might do many foolish things out of bravado, suicide was not likely to be one of them. After a pause she began to question him about the possibility of his eventually obtaining a commission. What steps could be taken on his behalf? Did he think that Colonel Egerton would be willing to recommend him? Would it be

necessary to wait a long time before the desired promotion could be asked for?

The young fellow jerked up his shoulders again.

"Upon my word, I can't tell you," he answered. "I believe commissions used to be given rather more freely some years ago than they are now; too many gentlemen have taken to enlisting in these days, you see. If it came to that, I dare say the old colonel would back me up, for he isn't a bad old sort, and he happens to like me; but I expect a good deal of interest in high quarters would be wanted. After all, what would be the use? A man can't live in the 22nd Lancers upon nothing a year, and you know whether my dear papa would be likely to make me an allowance or not."

"I think he would," Anne returned; "I think you forget what provocation he has had, and how natural it is for him to feel that he can't trust you. But if it were proved to him that you really wished to make a fresh start, and that you had worked hard for it, I believe he would be ready to forgive you. Anyhow, it is worth trying for, isn't it? Especially as there is nothing else to try for."

"H'm! In the meantime there are other and more attainable blessings which are quite worth having, I assure you. Beer, for instance. Well, no; we won't say beer; we will say socks and underclothing and pocket-handkerchiefs, and perhaps a decent cigar once in a while, for a real treat. I am sorry to appear greedy, but the time is getting short, and I warned you just now that I have become a slave to brutish appetites. My dear Anne, how much coin have you brought with you?"

It was not very much; for her allowance had of necessity been curtailed, and her mother did not like to see her shabbily dressed; but she gave him all that she could spare—in fact, to be strictly accurate, she gave him a good deal more than she could spare—and he accepted the amount with a careless word or two of thanks. Then he was in a great hurry to be off. He

had not much more than time to catch the train to the cathedral town where he was quartered, he said, and he did not expect that he would obtain permission to absent himself until so late an hour again.

"But you can write when you like," he added, laughing, "and you can enclose a postal order as often as you please. The smallest contributions thankfully received."

"Yes," answered Anne meekly. "But, Spencer—stop one moment!—what am I to do about Mr. Austin? Had I not better tell him the truth when I get an opportunity? He must have seen us, and he may not have guessed—men are often so extraordinarily stupid!—he may not have guessed who you were."

"By all means tell him, then; personally, I don't care a button who knows that I am a non-commissioned officer in the 22nd Lancers. All the same, I doubt whether he will believe you, and I'm sure he won't thank you for spoiling a good story. If I were you I should swear through thick and thin that his eyes had deceived him."

"Mr. Austin is a gentleman," said Anne rather coldly; "I am not in the least afraid of his mentioning what he saw as a good story. Only he might imagine——"

"Well, my dear girl, I can't help your friend's imaginings, and it's no fault of mine that you are in this equivocal position. I warned you that the game wasn't worth the candle. Now I really must bolt to the station."

He submitted to her long, clinging embrace, and kissed her lightly on the cheek as he disengaged himself. Of course he did not enjoy being hugged; he never had liked such demonstrations even in the old days, nor do brothers ever care about being hugged by their sisters. This was what Anne said to herself in order to make him out less callous than he affected to be; but for all that she had not many illusions respecting him. She remained motionless until the sound of his quick, ringing footsteps upon the hard ground had died away; then she turned with a sigh to speed upon her homeward journey.

Anne was no coward; still she did not altogether relish

the prospect of that long tramp along the lonely road. It had been one thing to slip out and hasten through the falling snow, sustained by the hope of seeing Spencer once more ; it was a somewhat different thing to retrace her steps, with possible detection awaiting her at the end of her walk and many other disagreeable possibilities attendant upon the course of it.

Now, she had not advanced very far, hugging the shadow of the bare hedgerows and stepping as noiselessly as she could across the grass, when her attentive ear caught the distant sound of hoofs and wheels. She stood still and listened. Yes ; there could be no doubt about it ; a vehicle of some sort was approaching rapidly from the direction of the town. Presently she knew that it was a two-wheeled vehicle, and then a horrid suspicion flashed across her mind which was verified almost as soon as formed. In the bright moonlight that high dog-cart, that fast-trotting roan mare, that seated figure in the thick driving-coat were only too clearly recognizable. Mr. Austin kept turning his head from side to side as he drew nearer ; quite evidently he was looking for somebody. Really it was a little unfair and not a little impertinent of him to behave as he was doing, and for a moment Anne thought of casting herself full-length into the dry ditch by the wayside until he should have passed. But what would have been the use of doing that ? Since an explanation was inevitable, the sooner it was made the better ; so she emerged from the somewhat ineffectual ambush afforded by an elm-tree, and waited calmly in the middle of the road until he pulled up beside her.

He took off his hat and said, in the most matter-of-course tone in the world,—

“ May I drive you as far as your gates, Miss Frere ? I am going that way.”

Without noticing his offer, she replied,—

“ I was sure you had seen me. I don't know why you should have thought it necessary to pursue me, but I am glad you haven't brought your groom with you. Per-

haps I had better tell you at once that the soldier to whom I was talking when you passed on your way home was my brother."

"Of course it was. I guessed that at once, and I may tell you, for your comfort, that you were not recognized by the groom. I said a word or two to him about the cavalry soldier just to satisfy myself that he had suspected nothing, and I found that it was all right. And, indeed, I did not come out again in pursuit of you; it is perfectly true that I have to go and see a patient who lives some miles beyond Hayes Park; a note from his wife was waiting for me when I reached home. I plead guilty to having left James behind, much against his will, because I thought it not unlikely that I might overtake you; but I did not contemplate giving you a lift home when I started. I thought your brother would surely take the trouble to escort you as far as the lodge."

"He couldn't; he was obliged to catch a train. And nothing could have happened to me; there are no tramps about at this time of year. It is very good of you," Anne added, with a more friendly intonation, "to take this so sensibly."

"Oh, I don't know about sensibly," said Matthew, laughing. "Can you manage to climb into the cart without my getting down? I can't quite trust the mare to stand, unless she has somebody at her head. There! that's all right; and will you put this plaid over your shoulders, please? I don't know so much about sensibly—a sensible man might think it his duty to inform Mr. Frere. But I have my own little ideas upon the subject of duty, and you may rely upon me to hold my tongue. Nevertheless, if I may take the liberty of saying so, I do trust you will not repeat this escapade. It really is dangerous—horribly dangerous; though perhaps not to life or limb."

They were speeding along the high road again by this time, and Anne, obedient to instructions, had enveloped herself in the doctor's warm plaid.

"Yes, I know it is," she answered meekly enough; "but I don't think it will happen again, and if you keep my secret I am not likely to be found out this time. Nurse, who knows where I have been, is sitting up for me, and will let me in through the window of the house-keeper's room. I couldn't resist going out to-night; I don't know when I may have another opportunity of seeing poor Spencer."

"Well, it was a plucky thing to do; I only hope he appreciates your courage and unselfishness. So that was why you looked as if you were wishing me at Jericho when your father brought me in to dinner!"

"Did I look like that? I am sorry if I did; but, of course, your being there rather complicated matters. I was so afraid mamma would insist upon my remaining in the drawing-room." After a short pause she asked, "What made you conjecture at once that the soldier was Spencer?"

"Could it, possibly have been anybody else? I am glad, for your sake, that he has taken the Queen's shilling. He might have done very much worse, I should think."

"Oh, he *has* done worse," answered Anne, with a melancholy little laugh; "but whether this will help him to do better eventually or not I'm sure I don't know. It isn't in him to persevere with things, and I hardly dare to hope that he will ever get his commission. If it were possible to tell papa what he is doing, there might be a chance; because we have still a few friends in high places, though we have dropped so completely out of society."

"But isn't that possible?"

She shook her head.

"Not at present. We aren't allowed even to mention Spencer's name, and there would be a terrible explosion if it were to appear that I had been corresponding with him all this time. It isn't that my father is unforgiving; he has forgiven again and again; only there are people—of course you must know that—who are forced to make themselves out relentless just because they are a

little afraid in their hearts of relenting. Oh no ; I am sure he would never consent to ask a favour of anybody for Spencer ; the one hope would be to get the commission without his having heard anything about it. Then he would have a fair excuse for saying that a fresh start had been made and that the past had been partly atoned for."

"I see. Well, it isn't much influence that I can boast of with official personages ; but my brother, I believe, has some and is rather fond of exercising it. Would you mind my applying to him ? He is very cautious and trustworthy, and even if he refused to help he would not chatter about anything that had been imparted to him in confidence."

Anne was kept silent by a sudden access of the shyness from which she had been free up to that moment, but which now rendered her somewhat unwilling to lay herself under obligations to comparative strangers.

"You are very kind," she said constrainedly at length.

"That means 'Mind your own business !' "

"No ; I didn't mean anything so rude and ungrateful as that ; but——"

"But you doubt whether I could be of much assistance to you, perhaps ? Very likely I can't ; still, it is a mere question of writing a note, and Godfrey, as I tell you, is perfectly safe. It seems rather a pity to leave any stone unturned."

Anne could not but agree that it was. She assented presently to the writing of the note, remarking apologetically that she knew of no one else to whom it would be safe for her to avow that she had been holding communication with her brother.

"And I suppose it wouldn't be necessary for you to say anything about me in writing to Sir Godfrey, would it ?"

"Oh, dear, no ! I should only explain the circumstances as concisely as possible, and say that I wanted to do some little thing towards repaying all the kindness and hospitality that your family have shown me. That

will sound natural enough, and will satisfy Godfrey, who is not inquisitive."

"You are very kind," Anne repeated.

But this time she spoke as if she meant what she said, and in truth she did mean it. Perhaps she exaggerated a little the value of such kindness as she had received and might be going to receive at Matthew's hands; perhaps she scarcely realized that to be of service to his fellow-creatures was as sincere a pleasure to him as the promotion of our personal enjoyment is to the rest of us; still, as a matter of fact, he had refrained from placing her in an awkward predicament and had volunteered to aid her towards accomplishing the object nearest to her heart—not to speak of having given her a very welcome lift and the loan of a much-needed wrap.

The wrap, however, had to be surrendered presently, notwithstanding his earnest entreaties that she would keep it until she should have an opportunity of returning it to him.

"Thank you very much; but I shouldn't dare," she said, after she had made him stop beside a stile, some three or four hundred yards short of the lodge; "one of the servants might see it, and then questions might be asked. I shan't catch cold during the few minutes that it will take me to run across the park. Good-night, and a thousand thanks! If ever I am able to do anything for you in return—but it isn't much use to say that, I am afraid."

"There are several things that you could do for me without loss of time," Matthew declared. "Have you a fire in your bedroom?"

"Oh yes."

"Then warm yourself thoroughly in front of it before you go to bed; that's one thing. Another thing that you might do would be to make friends, if you can, with that Miss Murray about whom I was speaking to your mother. The poor girl is lonely, and it would make all the difference to her to have some nice friend."

"Very well; I will do what I can," Anne promised.

"In that case I think we may cry quits, as far as we have gone. By the way, don't build too much upon Godfrey ; it is only a sort of hit or miss attempt, you know, and he may very likely say that he can do nothing at the Horse Guards. Anyhow, I'll let you know as soon as I hear from him."

He watched Anne's tall, slim figure across the snow-covered grass until a belt of evergreens concealed it from view ; after which he drove on. He was filled with compassion and admiration for her, and was pretty well pleased with himself into the bargain, now that there seemed to be some definite prospect of assisting her. The quiet satisfaction with which he recalled their colloquy was not disturbed for a moment by any suspicion that he had made a somewhat maladroit request in begging her, as a favour to himself, to take Lilian Murray under her special protection. That was the sort of ignoble idea which would never have found its way into Matthew Austin's mind, for all his exhaustive acquaintance with the intricacies of human nature.

CHAPTER VIII.

MATTHEW MAKES HIMSELF USEFUL.

MRS. FRERE was notorious throughout the neighbourhood for the lenient view which she took of her liabilities in the matter of paying visits. Busy she could hardly be called; but, like many other persons who have no settled work to do, she was never without a plausible excuse for procrastination, and although she spoke every day of calling upon Lady Sara Murray, she allowed a fortnight to elapse before redeeming her promise to Matthew Austin. Perhaps she would not have made her way to Prospect Place even then had she not been forcibly dragged thither by her more conscientious daughter.

Anne, to be sure, was not precisely consumed with anxiety to make the acquaintance of these two ladies, whom, for some reason, or for no reason, she did not expect to like very much; still, she remembered that Mr. Austin had made a point of her showing something more than ordinary civility to the younger, and her conscience reproached her for a delay which, after all, was no fault of hers.

Lady Sara, who seldom left the house, was at home, and her daughter was reading the newspapers to her when the visitors were announced. Anne, following in Mrs. Frere's wake, scrutinized the girl with some curiosity. The girl was unquestionably very pretty, perhaps even beautiful; but whether her mental were on a par with her physical gifts it was not easy to discover. At all events, it was not very easy to talk to her; nor, for the matter of that, did Anne ever find it very easy to talk to girls. She did her best; she asked such questions as seemed appropriate; she hoped Miss Murray

would come to tea with her some afternoon ; she suggested country walks and spoke of the dances which were usually given about Christmas time ; but she elicited little more than monosyllabic replies. Lilian evidently did not take to her, and she, on her side, did not take particularly to Lilian. Anne often felt that she was predestined to be an old maid, and that young people looked upon her as having prematurely fulfilled her destiny. Before long she had exhausted her list of possible topics ; so that she was driven in despair to listen to the conversation of her elders, hoping that she might derive some fresh ideas from that source.

Her elders were getting on swimmingly, and experienced none of the embarrassment with which she was afflicted. Mrs. Frere always had plenty to say for herself, and, as she knew a great many people whom Lady Sara knew, she had the good fortune to be interested as well as interesting. In these latter days a coterie has been formed in London, the members of which are understood to have bound themselves to converse only of things, not of people. It is a rule to be admired rather than imitated. We cannot all of us be so superior as that, and why should we be forced to proclaim our inferiority by remaining mute when we are really provided with quite a large number of fascinating subjects to discourse upon ? Mrs. Frere and Lady Sara discussed social celebrities to their hearts' content, and enjoyed the process so much that Anne had to wait fully five minutes before they dropped down to the mention of a humble individual with whom she also could boast of being tolerably intimate. However, when they did reach Mr. Austin, they had nothing but the most unqualified laudation to bestow upon him.

"It seems rather eccentric of him to be a doctor," Lady Sara said. "But I am sure I ought to be the last person to complain of his taste, for he has done me an immensity of good, besides cheering us up with constant visits for which he won't accept any payment. I was obliged to ask him the other day what I owed

him, because money is an object with me ; and how much do you suppose his account came to ? Three guineas ! I was really ashamed ; but he assured me that his regular professional charges amounted to no more than that, and that, if I wanted to pay him for looking in when he had nothing else to do, he wouldn't be able to come again until he was sent for."

"That is the advantage of having a gentleman for one's medical attendant," observed Mrs. Frere placidly. "One doesn't mind mentioning the subject of fees to him ; one knows he won't have any silly affectation about it, as poor old Jennings had. Not that we have mentioned the subject to Mr. Austin yet ; and I don't suppose we shall until after the new year, when one's poor little dividends begin to come in. We are all quite devoted to him—all except Anne, who doesn't bestow her friendship upon man or woman until she has summered them and wintered them. To be sure, Mr. Austin is one of these middle-aged sort of men who get on best with old people and children. I dare say your daughter, for instance, finds him a somewhat tedious person."

Lilian rather astonished one of her hearers by the warmth with which she repudiated this imputation.

"Whatever Mr. Austin may be, he isn't that," she declared. "I don't know what we should have done without him all this time, and if the other people who live hereabouts are half as amusing to talk to as he is, Wilverton can't be as dull a place as it looks."

The inference was not precisely flattering, and Lady Sara, who had had some experience of her daughter's occasional frank utterances, showed symptoms of nervousness ; but Mrs. Frere only gathered that the girl liked Mr. Austin and nodded smilingly back at her. After a few more words the subject dropped, and Lilian relapsed into taciturnity. As for Anne, she was more than ready to depart when her mother at length rose. She had done what in her lay to make friends with this beautiful but not (to her) very attractive Miss Murray, and her advances had not been welcomed. She could

say nothing further ; it was no fault of hers if she was less amusing to talk to than Mr. Austin. As she followed Mrs. Frere down the steep, narrow staircase, there was a decided feeling of resentment in her mind against Mr. Austin, who might, she thought, have had the common sense to understand that girls of a certain and tolerably numerous class never derive amusement from intercourse with members of their own sex. But when she emerged into the semi-darkness outside she had to forgive Matthew ; for there he was, helping Mrs. Frere into the carriage, and before showing the same polite attention to Anne, he took occasion to say hurriedly, in a low voice,—

“ I am so glad to have chanced upon you ! I have heard from Godfrey, and I want to tell you what he says. When could I see you alone ? ”

She had no time to do more than answer,—

“ I shall be at St. Mark’s on Sunday afternoon. Could you contrive to be there ? Then you might walk part of the way back with me.”

“ All right,” said Matthew ; “ I’ll manage it.”

Indistinct eulogies of Miss Murray’s loveliness and facetious warnings to Mr. Austin to beware of Cupid’s darts were proceeding from the obscure interior of the landau, where Mrs. Frere was making herself comfortable with a fur-lined rug and a foot-warmer. The young doctor responded with the jocosity which the occasion seemed to require ; after which Anne took her place and the vehicle was set in motion.

“ Really and seriously,” Mrs. Frere remarked, when she had kept silence for a minute or two, “ I think he had better be careful, poor dear man ! That girl is simply exquisite ! I couldn’t take my eyes off her all the time I was talking to Lady Sara, and it wouldn’t surprise me to hear that he was in much the same case. No wonder he charges nothing for his visits ! ”

“ I suppose there is no harm in his looking at her if he likes,” Anne said.

“ Well, that depends. I wouldn’t look at her more than I could help if I were a country doctor.”

But Anne, during the last few minutes, had made up her mind not to trouble herself about matters which did not concern her. The matters which did concern her, and with which Matthew had been so kindly pleased to concern himself, sufficed to engage her whole attention; if he chose to admire Lilian Murray he was at liberty to do so, and no exception could be taken to his taste. Meanwhile, the chief question to be considered was whether it would be practicable to attend afternoon service at St. Mark's, Wilverton, on the following Sunday afternoon, unaccompanied. To walk as far as the town on Sunday afternoons for the purpose of being present at St. Mark's, which boasted of an old-fashioned cathedral service, a fairly good choir, and an organist of florid propensities, was a practice to which she was much given while the days were long; but her father did not approve of her being out alone after dark, and she was much afraid that, on hearing of her intention, he would either offer to escort her himself or insist upon her being followed at a respectful distance by the footman.

There is, however, as most daughters and some sons are aware, one excellent way of avoiding paternal frustration of their intentions—which is to say nothing about them. When Sunday came Anne employed this simple method with success, and as soon as she reached the church she had the satisfaction of beholding the back of Matthew Austin's curly head in a prominent position. There was no sermon, and the anthem was a short one, so that it was still comparatively early when the worshippers trooped out, leaving behind them one of their number, who seemed to experience some difficulty in getting on her gloves. Anne, knowing that Matthew had seen her, and not wishing to be accosted by other acquaintances whom she had recognized amongst the congregation, did not hurry herself. She allowed them plenty of time to disperse before she moved down the darkening aisle to the porch, where a tall gentleman, with a bundle of letters in his hand, was patiently wait-

ing for her. She glanced interrogatively at these documents while responding to his greeting.

"Well?" she said.

"Well, I have pretty good news for you. I have been in correspondence with Godfrey, who is quite inclined to bestir himself, and indeed has bestirred himself. Luckily, he happens to be acquainted with your brother's colonel, which has rather facilitated matters. Of course you won't have expected to hear that a commission could be granted to-morrow, but there really seems to be every hope of its being granted before very long, provided that——"

"Yes?" said Anne, catching her breath.

"Provided that no hitch occurs. In short, to speak plainly, provided that your brother continues to behave with ordinary circumspection."

They had left the church and were walking slowly down the quiet street which gave access to it. The sun had already set; the stars were becoming visible and a chilly wind was beginning to blow from the north-east.

"Ah," sighed Anne, after a prolonged pause, "that's a large proviso!"

Her manner of receiving what should surely have been a welcome communication was so unexpectedly despondent that Matthew could not help laughing.

"But, my dear Miss Frere," he remonstrated, "the authorities could hardly make a more modest stipulation than that, could they? I must tell you that, according to my information, these promotions of gentlemen from the ranks are becoming less and less frequent. One can understand that there are obvious objections to what, after all, must partake a little of the nature of favouritism; besides which, it appears that commanding officers don't, as a rule, like having gentlemen in the ranks at all. I suppose that, as a rule, these gentlemen-rankers are not particularly apt to be circumspect, and I was thinking that it would be just as well for you to mention, when you write to your brother——"

"Oh, I won't fail to do that," interrupted Anne; "the only question is whether he will listen or have patience. What has he been doing? You have heard something, I am sure."

"No, indeed; nothing of any real consequence. Colonel Egerton speaks most highly of him in a military sense, and is evidently anxious to push him on. I believe there have been some peccadilloes, but at present, so far as I understand, there is no serious obstacle in the way of his advancement."

"And how long will he have to wait, do you think?"

"Ah, that I can't say. He must reach the highest non-commissioned rank—troop-sergeant-major, I think they called it, but I am very ignorant about military matters—before he can be recommended for a commission; only I gathered that his promotion up to that point might be made tolerably rapid. Perhaps he would have to wait a year."

"Oh, a year!—that sounds manageable. I was afraid it would be three or four years at least." She turned towards her companion, at whom she had not hitherto been looking, and exclaimed, in an altered tone, "What a wretch you must think me! You have been taking all this trouble for me, and I have not even said 'Thank you' yet! I suppose I didn't dare to be thankful until I could hope that your trouble would be rewarded. But I do hope now, and I do thank you from the bottom of my heart."

Matthew really deserved some thanks; for he had taken more trouble about this business than he had cared to confess. Although he was not upon unfriendly terms with his brother, he would have preferred not to ask a favour of Sir Godfrey, and, as a matter of fact, his first letter had not been very graciously received, Sir Godfrey having declared, in reply, that it would be out of the question for him to use his influence on behalf of a young man who had avowedly gone to the bad, while he professed himself quite unable to understand on what grounds he had been requested to do so. There-

upon Matthew had hastily journeyed up to London, had managed to move the reluctant baronet to action, if not to sympathy, and had likewise called upon a certain high official at the War Office whom he had once attended in a dangerous illness. The high official, fortunately, had not forgotten Mr. Austin, though he shook his head and pursed up his lips when the nature of Mr. Austin's errand was unfolded to him. However, he promised to make inquiries, and the upshot of it all had been that Matthew, after his return home, had received the sheaf of encouraging letters which he now held in his hand. His task had not been an altogether pleasant one, because he had had some difficulty in explaining why he took such a particular interest in young Frere, and he had also been informed of episodes in young Frere's past and present career which did not redound to the credit of that warrior; still he had been rewarded by ultimate success, and he had no intention of telling Anne what uncomfortable moments the pursuit of success had caused him to pass through.

"Oh, you had better thank Colonel Egerton, if you must thank any one," he answered lightly. "My share in the transaction was simply to beg somebody to beg somebody else to do what could be done."

She opened her lips as if to speak, but closed them again and walked on for some little distance in silence. She and her escort had left the streets behind them, had passed through a gate, and were crossing a pasture coated with hoar-frost before she said,—

"I understand perfectly well whom I have to thank, and I am all the more grateful because I am sure you hated begging anything of anybody. It is hateful to have to beg; but how can one help it, when one is asking on behalf of one's own flesh and blood? The worst of it is that Spencer is nothing to you, and you must have heard things about him—I know by what you said just now that you must have heard things. I wonder whether you would mind telling me what they were."

Well, he really could not tell her exactly what he had heard ; so he took refuge in evasion.

" You are much too apprehensive," he replied ; " your brother wouldn't have been a sergeant now unless he had a pretty clean regimental record, you may be sure. One doesn't expect the average young man to be a saint ; but at any rate he doesn't appear to have taken to drinking, and that, they say, is the rock upon which gentlemen who enlist are most apt to wreck themselves."

" Are you sure of that ? " asked Anne quickly.

" I am sure that Colonel Egerton said so. Have you any reason to fear the contrary ? "

" I suppose I have reason for every kind of fear. Mr. Austin, I don't want to deceive you, and I can't deceive myself, about Spencer. He is not to be trusted, and I feel now as if I had had no business to let you make yourself in a way responsible for him. If he were to desert, or to do some other disgraceful thing after this, your brother would be very much displeased with you, wouldn't he ? "

" I don't think so," answered Matthew ; " but if he were, I could make shift to endure his displeasure. Don't begin to worry yourself with morbid ideas which there is nothing in the case to warrant. You have done your best, and I have done my little best, such as it has been. Let us rest satisfied with that knowledge and talk about something else. How did you like the Murrays ? "

Anne, being a truthful person, had to confess that she had not hit it off particularly well with Miss Murray.

" But I dare say that was my own fault," she added magnanimously. " I don't make friends very easily, and the things that interest young girls don't interest me much. However, I will do my best to cultivate her, if only because you asked me to do so, and because it is my bounden duty to do all I possibly can when you ask me."

" You will like her when you know her better," Matthew declared confidently. " She is a mere child

as yet, and she has childish *gaucheries*, but when once she is at her ease, she can chatter as quaintly as anybody I ever met in my life. I am sorry for her, too, for I am afraid there is no hope that her mother will ever be really well again, and one doesn't see what sort of future lies before her."

"She will marry somebody, I suppose."

"Yes; but whom? The first that comes, provided that he is rich enough and aristocratic enough, I am afraid. A commonplace fate; but a pathetic one all the same."

He enlarged upon this theme, which, with Anne's occasional comments thereupon, sufficed to keep the conversation alive until Hayes Park had been reached. The truth was that he did not wish to be catechized any further about Sergeant Frere of the 22nd Lancers, and his companion was quick-witted enough to divine that much. However, on taking leave of him, she could do no less than reiterate her thanks, to which she added a promise that he should not regret his kindness if she could help it.

"After all, when so much is at stake, he can surely keep steady for one short year!" she exclaimed half interrogatively.

"Oh, dear me, yes, I should think so," was Matthew's encouraging reply.

CHAPTER IX.

UNFORESEEN PERIL.

IT falls to the lot of doctors and parsons to see many strange things, and they are, or ought to be, much less easily astonished than the rest of us. Anglican clerics, it is true, learn remarkably little, as a rule, considering what their opportunities are, because they lack that preliminary training which is of so much value to their brethren of the Romish communion; but the average English doctor knows a good deal, and may be relied upon to exercise the average English common sense in dealing with the facts before him. Matthew Austin, therefore, ascribed no more importance than it deserved to an episode which might have had uncomfortable results for Miss Frere, if not for himself, nor did he think it incumbent upon him to go out of his way in order to call at Hayes Park and ascertain what he had omitted to ask on the occasion of their last meeting, whether she had effected her midnight entry without detection. Hearing nothing in the course of the next few days, he assumed—and was quite correct in assuming—that she and the nurse had managed matters successfully between them.

For the rest, he was a little disinclined to seek further occasions of private parley with Anne, fearing lest she might insist upon hearing more about her brother than it was desirable that she should hear. Colonel Egerton's confidential report respecting the latter had, in truth, been somewhat disquieting, although from a strictly professional point of view it had been satisfactory enough. The letter which had been handed over to Matthew by the official personage at the War Office was brief and frank.

"Personally, I like the man," the colonel wrote. "I think he would make a first-rate officer, and I have had one or two talks with him and given him some good advice. But whether he will keep straight or not I can't say. I don't believe he drinks; only it is always one of two things, you know, and in his case I suspect that it's the other thing. He is too good-looking and too much given to swagger. Of course all the women here—the so-called ladies, I mean—have found out that he is a gentleman, and it would not surprise me to hear at any moment that he had got himself into a scrape. I only say this in order that you may breathe a word of warning to his friends. I can't very well speak to him upon the subject, except in general terms."

That was tantamount to saying that an advance from the general to the particular might be made without indiscretion by Sergeant Frere's friends, and Matthew, after some hesitation, had decided to address a few lines to his unknown *protégé*, quoting Colonel Egerton's remarks, and venturing to add a few comments of his own thereupon. No answer had reached him, nor, in fact, had he expected any; but he had his own misgivings, grounded upon some previous acquaintance with good-looking, swaggering, and ostentatiously reckless young men.

Meanwhile, he was forced to recognize regretfully that his attempt to bring about an intimacy between Anne Frere and Lilian Murray had been a failure. Lilian, when casually interrogated upon the subject, confessed candidly that she did not like Miss Frere.

"I went to tea with her yesterday," the girl said, "and I should have yawned my head off if I hadn't been particularly cautioned by mamma to mind my manners. Besides, as she is such a friend of yours, I thought I would try my very best to be amiable. But she frightened and froze me. I suppose she never makes you feel inclined to swear at her, does she?"

"I can't say that she has produced that effect upon me as yet," answered Matthew, laughing.

"Well, she produces that effect upon *me*. Oh, not because of anything that she says or does; only because one can't help wondering what the consequences would be. I see you don't understand, and I can't explain. You like people because they are good."

"One might have a worse reason for liking them."

"Yes; but it's a reason for disliking them when one isn't over and above good one's self, and when they *are* over and above good. You are as good as gold; but then you have a different way of showing your goodness."

All this was so manifestly unfair that Matthew could only hold his peace and reflect that fairness towards one another is not the common attribute of women. He might have gone a little further and remembered that jealousy is their universal attribute, had he not been determined to look upon Lilian Murray as a mere child. To suppose that her jealousy could have been aroused by his frequently-expressed admiration for Anne Frere would, according to his view, have been a little too ridiculous.

He now ceased, however, to express that admiration with so much frequency, because praise of the absent was never yet known to overcome prejudice. It was a pity that two ladies so charming in their respective fashions could not hit it off together; but since they could not, there was no more to be said. Lilian, too—so, he was informed, when he paid his hurried daily visits to her mother—was in less urgent need of companionship than she had been. Wilverton was filling rapidly; the gouty and rheumatic arrivals included, as might have been anticipated, a few acquaintances of Lady Sara's, and these had brought with them relatives who were not yet of an age to understand the meaning of stiff joints. Lilian was no longer forced to rely solely upon her own resources for killing time, while Lady Sara herself was enlivened by remote contact with the outer world.

The unfortunate thing was that this natural craving

for contact with the outer world was apt to bring her into contact with the outer air more often than her medical adviser could think prudent. He did not like to forbid drives with friends who had a comfortable carriage at her service and whose society was good for her spirits ; but he feared that these well-meaning people were not quite as careful as they should have been to avoid exposing her to raw cold, and, dropping in at Prospect Place late one evening, he found, sure enough, that she had at last caught the chill which he had dreaded. He packed her off to bed at once, prescribed remedies, and hoped for the best ; but it was no surprise to him to be called back, a few hours later, and to discover that his patient was undoubtedly in for an attack of bronchitis.

“ We have taken it in time, and we ought to be able to stave off serious mischief,” he told the alarmed Lilian. “ We won’t meet trouble half-way, anyhow. I have given full instructions to the nurse, but if it would be a comfort to you to see me, you must not scruple to send for me at any hour of the day or night.”

She would not, in any case, have been likely to be troubled with scruples on that score, for she had implicit faith in Matthew’s powers, and probably did not think that other patients of his might be as much in want of him as her mother was ; but poor Lady Sara soon became so ill that there was every excuse for the imploring message which reached him before he was up on the following morning. He hastened to Prospect Place as soon as he had put on his clothes, and could not disguise either from himself or from those about her that the sick woman was in a bad way. Complications which he had dreaded, but had preferred not to anticipate, had set in with unexpected suddenness, and whether he would be able to pull her through or not was a very doubtful question indeed.

In emergencies of that crucial kind Matthew always instinctively assumed his professional manner ; so that Lilian was rather overawed by the concise, peremptory

orders issued to her, and hardly ventured to inquire what was the matter. She would not have understood if she had been told, and indeed he told her no more than that they had now pleurisy as well as bronchitis to contend against; but later in the day he thought it his duty to ask whether she would like to have a second opinion, and to offer, in that case, to telegraph to London for her.

"I don't know," she answered, catching her breath; "how can I tell? Won't you advise me about what I ought to do?"

Matthew considered for a minute or two.

"Well," he replied at length, "I am willing to take the entire responsibility upon myself. I say this, knowing that you may blame me hereafter, and I would not say it unless I were absolutely certain that the whole College of Physicians could give me no real help in the present instance."

"Do you mean that there is no hope, then?" asked the girl with quivering lips.

"No; I only mean that I have not the slightest doubt as to the method of treatment. More than that I must not say; it is for you to choose."

She chose instantly and unhesitatingly—not, of course, understanding that Matthew had risked a severe blow to his reputation in order to spare her pocket.

"If you can't save mamma's life, nobody can," she cried. "And," she added, after a moment, "whatever happens, you may be sure that I shall never be such a wretch as to blame you."

Well, he was glad that she had decided to trust him. He could but do his best, and he knew that no eminent London colleague could do more than he was doing; but during the week that ensued he had a very anxious time of it. Sometimes he felt almost sanguine, but more often he despaired. The odds against the patient's recovery were too formidable to be overcome by skill; her only chance lay in a stock of vitality with which he had no reasonable ground for crediting her.

Nevertheless, skill counts for something, and a day came at length when he was able to say that he had gained the victory which he had set himself to gain. Lady Sara, exhausted and barely conscious, might or might not sink in the course of the next twenty-four hours; but her disease, or rather diseases, had been beaten. This was what he told Lilian, whose courage and self-command had won his enthusiastic admiration during the trying time through which she had passed, and to whom he now knew that he might venture to speak in plain language. She, on her side, had learnt to regard him with that species of unquestioning adoration which women usually reserve for priests. Perhaps she did not realize—not knowing how busy he was—the extent to which he had sacrificed hours which should have been devoted to rest and food in order that he might be as constantly as possible in attendance upon her mother; but she did know that it was he who had enabled her to endure the long ordeal of watching and nursing, and that his unflagging cheerfulness alone had preserved her from giving way to despair. Already she had begun to wonder what would become of her when the blow which seemed to be almost inevitable should have fallen, and when there would be no further need for a doctor's services in that house.

"If only it were to-morrow morning!" she sighed wistfully. "Do you think you will be able to come quite early?"

"Oh, I'm only going away for about an hour," he answered. "There are two people whom I *must* see; but I have arranged with Dr. Jennings about the others, and I mean to stay the night here. That will enable you to go to bed, which it is absolutely necessary that you should do. You may depend upon me to have you called in case of any change."

She had become so docile that it no more occurred to her to dispute his commands than to protest against his sitting up all night. She only ejaculated,—

"Oh, what a mercy! I feel as if nothing very bad

could happen while you are here. But must I undress? I am so dead tired that I could sleep quite soundly on the sofa in the sitting-room."

Matthew, after a moment's consideration, made the concession required of him.

"It isn't the same thing," he said, "and I can't have you falling ill upon my hands through sheer over-fatigue. Still, for this one night, you may keep your clothes on. Afterwards you will have to remember that it is indispensable for you to husband your forces."

"But will there be an afterwards?"

"Well, well! At all events, you must sleep, and I see by your eyes that sleep will come, whether you wish for it or not. Now it is time for me to be off. I won't be absent for more than an hour and a half at the outside."

He was not absent quite so long as that. The "arrangement" which he had concluded with Dr. Jennings was simply the handing over of certain patients to that bland practitioner, who had pointed out, with equal courtesy and firmness, that it would be not only improper but impossible for him to enter into anything which might have the appearance of a partnership with Mr. Austin. Matthew, therefore, was free for twelve hours to come, and congratulated himself upon his freedom. Only the nurse was in Lady Sara's room when he returned. Lilian, as he had anticipated, had succumbed to irresistible physical weariness and was sleeping heavily upon the sofa in the sitting-room, the nurse said.

He gave orders that she was on no account to be disturbed, dismissed the nurse to take an hour or two of the rest which she also urgently required, and seated himself by the bedside. There for a long time he remained, watching the semi-conscious sufferer, whose ceaseless movements gave him little encouragement, and deftly administering nourishment to her every now and again. She was going to die; he was almost sure of that now; and mingled with his professional sense

of disappointment and failure was an intense pity for the helpless girl whom she was about to leave behind her. It was so easy to foresee what would happen!—the period of dependence upon annoyed relations, the hastily-arranged *mariage de convenance*, the results which, in most cases, follow such unions as a matter of course. And all this because the age of miracles is said to be past, because Providence no longer interferes with the process of Nature, because dying women cannot be kept alive in order that mundane affairs may run more smoothly!

“Are we punished for our want of faith, or are we only meant to understand that our responsibilities are greater than we have chosen to assume?” Matthew wondered.

But soon after midnight something took place which lifted the burden of immediate responsibility off his shoulders, and which may have been an answer to his half-formulated prayers. He had not expected it; for a few seconds he scarcely dared to believe in it; but presently he satisfied himself that he had made no mistake, and that his patient was at last quietly slumbering. The nurse had by this time returned, and he whispered to her that he was going to impart the good news to Miss Murray, whom he could hear stirring in the adjoining room.

“I believe we shall pull this case through after all,” he murmured hopefully.

• To which the woman replied,—

“It’s thanks to you, sir, if we do.”

Well, that might or might not be so; but thanks which, if a little premature, were wholly irrepressible, at all events awaited him. Lilian, hardly yet awake, was standing, with dazed, wide-open eyes, beside the sofa when he entered, and at his first words her self-control, which she had maintained with so much difficulty during many anxious days and nights, forsook her altogether. She burst suddenly into hysterical weeping, she seized Matthew’s hand and kissed it, passionate

words and sentences, intended to express the gratitude which was perhaps his due, and attributable, as every reasonable man must have perceived, merely to her overstrung condition, broke from her lips. Matthew, who was nothing if not reasonable, soothed her to the best of his ability, and tried not to listen more than he could help to what she was saying. One doesn't, of course, listen more than one can help to the delirious ravings of those who, for the time being, have ceased to be sane fellow-creatures. But where does sanity end and insanity begin? If that question could be answered a good deal of trouble might be averted.

Anyhow, it was by no means certain yet that the great trouble which threatened Lilian Murray could be averted, and this was what Matthew strove to explain to her as soon as she had in some degree recovered her composure. Her mother, he assured her, was still very dangerously ill. There had been a turn for the better, and he had hopes now which he had not entertained a few hours earlier; more than that he could not feel justified in saying. But Lilian would have none of these stereotyped phrases.

"As if I could not see by your face that you have saved her!" she exclaimed, half laughing through her tears. "Oh, and you have saved me too! if you only knew! It is horrible to be so selfish and to think of anything or anybody except her; but I couldn't help it. All this time I have felt certain that I should lose her, and there isn't another creature in the world who cares a pin for me. It is what she has always dreaded—dying before I married—we have often talked about it. You see, ours has been a rather unfortunate family, and she was afraid—when one is obliged to find a home somewhere, one can't pick and choose——"

These incoherent avowals were intelligible enough to Matthew, who was unable to respond to them in his customary quasi-paternal tone. He was unable, in fact, to respond to them otherwise than a little gruffly; for it had dawned upon him all of a sudden that the regard

which he felt for Lilian Murray was not paternal at all, and that it behoved him to take very great care what he said. That, notwithstanding the warm language which she had employed just now, she could entertain any sentiment towards a country doctor, save one of somewhat exaggerated gratitude, was, of course, as much out of the question as it would have been for him to abuse the position of trust in which he was placed; yet, in the event of a not improbable contingency, might she not do worse than become the wife even of a country doctor who loved her?

But this latter query was one which merely flitted across Matthew's brain while he was regaining his hold over himself and making the girl swallow a few drops of sal volatile. If his own nervous system had been temporarily shaken almost as much as hers, he had had far more practice in reducing it to submission, and he soon recovered his natural voice and manner. On quitting her, however, to return to Lady Sara's room, he inwardly determined not to see her again before the morning. The nurse should be sent to her, he promised, when her mother woke.

CHAPTER X.

AN UPSET.

OF all the triumphs that fall to the share of the fortunate among mankind, how many are due to desert, and how many to simple good fortune? Modest field-m Marshals, prime ministers, patentees of epoch-making inventions, renowned jockeys, and other shining lights—it must be said for these heroes that most of them are quite modest—are wont to ascribe their several exalted positions to the latter rather than to the former cause. Still, nothing succeeds like success, and, when all deductions have been made, the rough-and-ready rule of judging by results remains the only safe one open to us. Possibly Lady Sara Murray recovered from her dangerous illness, not because she had an excellent and most attentive doctor, but because her constitution was a tougher one than it appeared to be; but this did not prevent Mr. Austin from reaping immense credit for having snatched a patient out of the very jaws of death, nor, to tell the truth, did it prevent him from triumphing in a quiet way when nobody was looking on.

He stood at his dining-room window one morning after breakfast, gazing out at the brown, empty flower-beds and the evergreen shrubs, illumined by pale rays of winter sunshine, and said to himself that this sort of thing was worth living for. A week had elapsed since that critical night when he had all but made up his mind that Lilian Murray was to be left an orphan, and he was now able to affirm that immediate risk of that catastrophe was at an end. Whether through his skill alone, or only through his skill supplemented by favourable circumstances, Lady Sara was about to enter upon the convalescent stage, and, after all, the labourer

is worthy of his hire. It was a legitimate triumph which he was fully entitled to enjoy.

But what—beyond the enhanced reputation to which he attached no more value than it merited—was his hire? And why was he in such exuberant spirits as to be unable to help ejaculating aloud that life was worth living? He was not greatly given to introspection, or he might have felt it his duty to take himself to task somewhat severely upon these points. There is surely no great cause for exultation in having fallen desperately in love with a girl of little more than half your own age, and considerably more than double your own social importance. A man who allows himself to behave in that way is no better than an ass, while, if he were to contemplate taking advantage of a family physician's opportunities for the furtherance of projects upon which lovers are usually intent, he would be rather worse than an ass. But Matthew was troubled with no such unpleasant reflections. It was perfectly obvious to him that Lilian Murray was, for all practical purposes, as far removed from his reach as a royal princess; he no more dreamt of declaring his love than of asking himself whether, by any wild possibility, it could be returned; he was simply satisfied with seeing her every day, with knowing that, for the time being, he had made her happy, and with noticing how her face lighted up the moment that his own came within her view. There exist, amongst the endless varieties of human beings, a few of his sort; men and women who are genuinely—constitutionally, it may be—unselfish, and who, without any figure of speech, are fonder of their fellow-mortals than they are of themselves.

From one point of view it was doubtless fortunate both for Matthew and for Lilian that they were ignorant of the reports which were being industriously circulated about them by Mrs. Jennings and other unemployed old ladies; for, had they been aware of these, their intercourse must necessarily have become less unembarrassed than it was. But one of them, when he went his daily

rounds, was in too great a hurry to listen to gossip, while the other heard nothing and saw nobody. A certain number of professedly anxious inquirers did, indeed, get as far as the door of the house in Prospect Place, but no farther. Lilian sent reports of her mother's condition down to them, but steadily declined to receive them, alleging that she did not feel fit to do so. She would not even see Mrs. Frere, who brought flowers and grapes, and who was good-naturedly desirous of cheering the poor girl up. It was Matthew who encountered that kind-hearted lady just as she was upon the point of driving away one day, and who was beckoned to and questioned by her.

"Can't we be of any use?" Mrs. Frere wanted to know. "One doesn't wish to be a nuisance; only one would like to do what one could, and it makes me wretched to think of poor little Miss Murray without a single friend to speak to in her trouble. Oh, I know she has you, and you have been quite indefatigable, they tell me; still, you are a man, you see, and men, with the best will in the world, can't understand exactly how to deal with girls."

If a delicate hint was intended to be conveyed by this remark it was lost upon Matthew, who thought he knew quite well how to deal with Miss Murray, and who had no suspicion that the gossips were busy with his name and hers. What caused him a moment's self-reproach, when Mrs. Frere had left him, was that he had forgotten to inquire after Anne—had, indeed, for some little time past almost forgotten Anne's existence. To be sure, as he reflected, half commiserating, half laughing at himself, there had been excuses for him. Who doesn't forget his friends when he has been goose enough to fall in love?

The danger that lay before him no doubt was that he might forget, not only people, but certain things which it was very necessary for his peace of mind to remember. Associating as he did with Lilian and her mother upon terms of equality, he might insensibly drift into a false

estimate of their respective stations, might even allow himself to cherish hopes which were palpably absurd. Lady Sara, sitting up in bed, and being now permitted to talk as much as she liked, administered an anticipatory corrective one day, which was all the more effective because it was evidently dictated by no *arrière pensée*.

"I can't deny that it is pleasant to feel one's health returning," said she; "still, I am ever so much more indebted to you on Lilian's account than I am on my own. If you can patch me up enough to enable me to get through one London season, I shall be ready to sing *Nunc Dimittis* and expire, blessing you. Of course, she is young, and one would gladly have waited a year or two; but I must not think of that—there isn't time. With her face, and with the connections I have managed to keep up, a husband of the requisite rank and means ought to be discovered for her without much difficulty."

"Is it so certain that rank and wealth are essential to happiness?" Matthew inquired.

"Oh yes, I think so. At any rate, wealth is. You see, my dear Mr. Austin, I am not in a state to maintain pretty fictions—even if anybody did maintain them nowadays. Grim realities stare me in the face, and I have seen a good deal of the world in my time. I wish it were what poets and romance-writers try to make it out; but unfortunately it isn't. Lilian is like a thousand other girls, and will be like a thousand other women; she may miss the very best that is attainable, but I hope to provide her at least with the second best. And I suppose we all know what that is."

Matthew supposed that we did. With a rather heavy heart he went down to the door, where his dog-cart was waiting to take him several miles out into the country. He had an outlying patient to visit, and as he drove at his usual rapid pace through the raw, moist air and along the muddy roads, he meditated upon what the second best was likely to mean in Lilian's case. Some

horrible old Marquis of Carrabas, perhaps, or some recently ennobled plutocrat, either of whom would weary of her charms and neglect her sooner or later. Well, then there would remain the consolations of jewels, dresses, and an abundance of creature comforts—possibly also the more legitimate consolation of maternity. It is useless to pretend that these things do not console; one must needs look truth in the face. But there are moments when Truth seems to wear so ugly a face that one would fain leave her at the bottom of her well and shut down the lid.

Matthew was precluded by the honesty of his nature from having recourse to that measure; so his spirits gradually sank lower and lower, as the shades of evening fell, although he knew no more now than he had known from the first. He had seen his patient, and was returning towards Wilverton when a young man on a bicycle shot noiselessly past him, splashing some mud into his face and starting the mare into a gallop. Matthew had one of his wheels half-way up a bank before he knew where he was; but his customary good luck preserved him from an upset, and presently he succeeded in checking the mare, while James, the groom, delivered himself of some forcible remarks upon cyclists in general and upon the young man who had so nearly caused an accident in particular.

“I wish he’d break his dratted neck, that I do!” ejaculated the irate James; “such fellers ain’t fit to live!”

“Upon my word, James, I believe you have got your wish!” exclaimed Matthew, as the sound of a crashing fall some distance ahead caught his ear. “He is down, anyhow, and had a nasty cropper, I suspect. This comes of tearing downhill a hundred miles an hour.”

It was the work of little more than a minute to overtake the reckless cyclist, who was discovered prostrate beside the heap of stones which had brought about his disaster, his broken and twisted machine lying near him. He was not unconscious, but he had cut himself a good

deal about the face, and seemed to be somewhat dazed, as well as very angry. After Matthew had rendered him some preliminary services, he relieved his feeling by objurgating bicycles with a vehemence which would have done credit to James himself. Then he remarked,—

“I don’t know how many bones I’ve broken, but I can’t move either of my arms without swearing. If you happen to know of any local Pill-box residing in the neighbourhood, it would be an act of charity to drive on and tell him that he’ll find me by the wayside. You might just mention that my name is Jerome, and that I’m staying with my uncle, Mr. Litton, at the Grange. I dare say he’ll know my uncle.”

“I myself happen to be a local Pill-box,” answered Matthew good-humouredly, “and if you will let me hoist you into my cart, I will drive you to the Grange without jolting you more than I can help. You have broken your right arm—I am not sure about the left—and I will set it for you as soon as I get you home; that is, unless your uncle, who is not one of my patients, prefers to send for somebody else.”

The stranger accepted this offer with many thanks, and apologized for having inadvertently spoken of the Good Samaritan who had come to his aid as a Pill-box. Of course, he remarked, he wouldn’t have done it if he had known. It was no easy matter to lift him over the wheel and place him in a semi-recumbent attitude upon the front seat, for he was a very tall and rather heavy young man; but with the help of James the feat was accomplished, and Matthew, resuming the reins, started the mare at a gentle pace towards Wilverton Grange, a large, modern mansion, with the whereabouts of which he was well acquainted.

His neighbour, at whom he glanced from time to time, was a handsome as well as a powerfully built fellow, with black hair, dark blue eyes, and regular features. He had no hair about his face, and could afford to follow the modern custom of shaving clean, since there was no fault to be found with the shape of his mouth. Just

now his countenance was adorned with sundry cuts and bruises, and he was evidently in a good deal of pain; but this he bore uncomplainingly. What vexed him, it appeared, was that he should have been the victim of a bicycle accident.

"I shouldn't so much have minded coming to grief out hunting or in a steeplechase," he observed ruefully; "that would at least have been respectable. But to be smashed up by an idiotic machine like that!—well, it will be a lesson to me. After this, I do hope my uncle will see how inhuman it is to ask a fellow down here for a fortnight and never offer to put up his horses. The very least he can do now is to pay the coachbuilder in Wilverton from whom I hired that brute of a thing. I expect he'll have the additional pleasure of entertaining me for another month, eh? How long does it generally take to get over this sort of business?"

Matthew replied that he could not possibly give an opinion without knowing what the extent of the injuries was. He was inclined to suspect that the young man was rather badly hurt; but, of course, he did not say so, and he made for Wilverton Grange as quickly as circumstances would permit. Of the wealthy and eccentric bachelor to whom that establishment belonged he had heard something from Mrs. Jennings, but, not being inquisitive, had forgotten the greater part of what the well-informed lady had told him. The place had been built many years before by Mr. Litton, who had likewise purchased, by degrees, a vast extent of adjoining property, and had consequently become, in a certain sense, the great man of the neighbourhood. He was in the habit of contributing munificently to local charities and public works; he lived all by himself, he never called upon anybody, and he was reported to have an uncommonly nasty temper. That was all that Matthew could remember about him.

What most people would have remembered, as a more or less interesting detail, was that he had a nephew—the shattered bicyclist, in fact—to whom it was gener-

ally assumed that he would some day leave the whole of his possessions ; but that, it is true, was none of Matthew's business. His business was to ascertain what was the matter, and he proceeded to do so with all possible celerity, after halting beneath the imposing Grecian portico of the Grange and hastily informing the butler and the footman of the accident which had occurred. Mr. Jerome was silently and swiftly taken upstairs—the servants being evidently anxious above all things to avoid alarming or disturbing their master—and, at the end of a careful and prolonged examination, Matthew had the satisfaction of announcing that a pair of broken arms practically constituted the sum of the mischief done.

“Not that that isn't enough,” he remarked, looking down compassionately upon the victim ; “only it might have been much worse. As it is, I am afraid you will have to resign yourself to a little immediate pain and some weeks of helplessness. I have done as much as I can for the present ; but I will dispatch my groom for the things that I want and stay with you until he comes back, if you like ; subject, of course, to your uncle's approval. Very likely he would rather send for his own doctor.”

“Oh, he be hanged !” returned the young man. “My body is my own if my soul isn't, and I suppose I am entitled to choose who shall put it into plaster of Paris for me. If you'll be good enough to undertake my case I shall be only too grateful. I can see that you have light hands and that you know what you're about. All I beg of you is that you won't let the old man come in here if you can help it. He is apt to be exasperating, and I don't feel quite fit to be exasperated just now.”

The speaker had by this time been put to bed, and was being attended to by his valet, who seemed to be a quiet and capable sort of man. Presently Matthew went away to give the requisite instructions to James, and was returning towards his patient's bedroom when he was intercepted at the top of the staircase by a little

old gentleman, leaning upon a stick, who said in a thin, sharp voice,—

“ Mr. Austin, I presume ? ”

Richard Litton was a man at whom nobody could look once without looking a second time, although his appearance could scarcely be described as prepossessing. Bent, undersized, and wearing a short, grey beard, while his upper lip was shaved, he did not impress the beholder as being either handsome, amiable, or well-bred, and his pinched features, shaggy eyebrows, and piercing grey eyes conveyed the idea that they might belong to a miser. Avarice, however, was by no means one of his somewhat numerous defects, nor was his heart as hard as his forbidding manner suggested. Moreover, there was a certain indescribable aspect of power about his countenance which commanded attention if not respect. He said he had been told by the butler of what had happened, put a few quick, pertinent questions, and ended by remarking,—

“ Well, I have always employed Dr. Jennings, and I shall continue to employ him when I am ill. I wish that to be clearly understood, please. But you are a younger man, and I dare say Leonard is better off with you. I am told that he is anxious to be left under your care. After all, it is only right that you should mend his bones, for I suppose you began by upsetting him and breaking them. I have heard that you are notorious for careless driving.”

“ That may be,” answered Matthew ; “ but it was not I who upset your nephew. On the contrary, he very nearly upset me ; after which he proceeded to upset himself.”

“ Indeed ? Well, Mr. Austin, I am obliged to you for the trouble that you have taken, and so ought he to be. But he is an ungrateful fellow you will find.”

“ Oh, there hasn't been any trouble,” answered Matthew, laughing a little. “ Except, indeed, in hoisting him into the dog-cart. That, I must admit, was a troublesome job, for he is no light weight.”

"I understood you to say that he had broken his arms," observed Mr. Litton. "I don't see why that should make it necessary to lift him. At least, I am not aware that he is in the habit of walking upon his hands."

"No ; but if you will try to get into a dog-cart with your arms tied behind your back, you will find that your legs are not of as much service to you as usual."

Matthew was rather surprised at perceiving that this rejoinder, which had not been meant to give offence, was taken in very ill part. He had not noticed that his interlocutor was slightly deformed, having one leg shorter than the other, and it was not until some time afterwards that he learnt how morbidly sensitive Mr. Litton was upon the subject. The old man drew his shaggy brows together, and said, in cold, polite accents, which contrasted with the half-good-humoured brusquerie of his previous utterances,—

"You will, no doubt, be detained for some little time longer, Mr. Austin, and I hope you will do me the honour to eat your dinner here. I must ask you to excuse me from entertaining you personally, as I seldom take my meals in the dining-room, but I can trust my butler to take care that your comfort is not neglected. I have received an intimation that my nephew does not desire to be troubled with me ; so I will not intrude upon him to-night. I wish you good-evening, sir."

He moved away very slowly—so slowly that his lameness was barely perceptible—until he reached a curtained doorway, through which he disappeared.

"Temper soured by prosperity and solitude and the consciousness of expectant heirs," thought Matthew. "Health probably indifferent, too ; for his chest is contracted, and there is a look of suffering about that hard, firm mouth of his. Men of his sort are very much to be pitied ; still, all things considered, I am rather glad that he is not my uncle."

CHAPTER XI.

THE CANTANKEROUS UNCLE.

IF Matthew was not much prepossessed in favour of the uncle he soon formed a high opinion of the nephew. There are people whose virtues demand patient excavation, while there are other and more fortunate folks whose fine qualities lie upon the surface for every eye to see and take pleasure in. Leonard Jerome's great popularity was probably due to the fact that he belonged to the latter class, and indeed his worst enemies—supposing that he had any enemies at all—could hardly have refused him credit for courage and good-humour. Matthew had to give him considerable pain, and he neither winced nor protested under it; nor did he grumble more than was natural and pardonable at the prospect of a prolonged period of helplessness, to which he was told that he must make up his mind. It is by no means everybody who is so cheerful or so reasonable as that, and Matthew, on concluding operations, felt impelled to say,—

“I wish all my patients had your pluck!”

“When one doesn't like the inevitable, there is nothing to be done but to lump it,” observed Mr. Jerome philosophically. “The really disgusting thing is to be punished in this way for an ignominious mishap which one will never be able to mention to one's friends without being sniggered at. That, and being laid up in Uncle Richard's house of all places in the world! I suppose he is in a thundering rage, isn't he?”

“He did not appear to be so,” Matthew replied. “I think he was a little bit afraid that I might seize this opportunity of representing myself as his medical attendant, and he wanted to make out that it was I who had

caused your accident ; but he was kind enough to offer me dinner."

" Well, you'll get a good dinner, anyhow. And by the way, you must be about ready for it. Please go down and refresh yourself and don't bother any more about me. I shall be all right with my man to look after me. He knows my little ways and won't quarrel with me for cursing him, as I dare say I shall every time he moves me. What a mercy it is that I have brought him with me ! I was within an ace of leaving him in London, because Uncle Richard hates having strange servants in the house, and a more cantankerous old beggar than my dear uncle I have never yet met. It is the chief aim and object of my life to keep friends with Uncle Richard, but I haven't made a bright success of it so far. Now go and get your dinner. Very many thanks to you for your clever treatment of me."

Matthew's surgical treatment was always clever ; but this particular case had afforded him no scope for doing more than any ordinary country practitioner could have done. Still, it is never disagreeable to be thanked, and he went downstairs very well pleased with his new acquaintance. As for the dinner, which was presently set before him, and which was deftly and silently served by the butler, it was beyond all praise. Now Matthew, as has already been hinted, was not indifferent to creature comforts, while he loved small refinements. The spacious, well-warmed dining-room, the excellence of the subdued taste displayed in its furniture, the few admirable modern paintings which adorned its walls — all these things appealed to him ; nor did he fail to take note of the thoughtfulness which had spared him the annoying and superfluous presence of several domestics. Mr. Litton, it was evident, was not only blessed with a first-rate *chef*, but with a delicate appreciation of the manner in which solitary guests ought to be entertained.

" Cantankerous he may be," Matthew mused, after he had been left by the butler with cigarettes and a cup of coffee ; " but he can't be altogether selfish, or it

never would have occurred to him to let me smoke in his dining-room. He himself doesn't look at all like a smoker. Still, there's no knowing. If that nephew of his doesn't please him, he must be hard to please, one would think."

That was exactly what the majority of Leonard Jerome's friends, some of whom likewise enjoyed the privilege of a slight acquaintance with Mr. Litton, did think. A man who couldn't get on with Jerome must be an ill-conditioned sort of old fellow, these sagacious persons were wont to observe, and it was really very hard lines on poor Jerome that he should be compelled, by considerations of ordinary prudence, to visit his uncle three or four times in the course of every year. The only consolation for them and for him—especially for him—lay in the thought that he would doubtless reap his reward ere long, Mr. Litton being over seventy years of age, and visibly breaking up.

Meanwhile, Leonard Jerome was not so badly off but that he could very well afford to wait for a year or two. He had a property of his own in the far north of England, upon which, it is true, his income did not enable him to reside; but as he had not the slightest wish to reside there, this could hardly be regarded in the light of a privation. His place was let, and he received a rent for it which, together with the interest of the personal property which he had inherited from his late father, sufficed to provide him with the means of leading a gay bachelor existence. And his existence so far had been gay enough to render those occasional duty-visits to Wilverton Grange quite endurable, by way of an alterative. What with his good looks, his well-known expectations, his proficiency in games and field-sports, and a certain vague, yet not wholly undeserved, reputation that he enjoyed for being cleverer than his neighbours, he was in immense request, and always had more invitations of one kind and another than he could possibly accept. Of ready money he had, if not quite as much as he wanted, at least as much as he had any business to want. He could hunt and shoot and yacht and give excellent little dinners

to those whose hospitality he felt disposed or bound to return. There were many ladies who were of opinion that he could also marry ; but he had not as yet felt either bound or disposed to do that. So, upon the whole, he was a very enviable young man, and it was scarcely wonderful that he should be a very amiable young man into the bargain. If amiability be not the outcome of an excellent digestion, a comfortable pecuniary position, and freedom from worry, physiologists must know much less about us than they pretend to know.

To whatever causes it may be due, and whatever excuses may be urged on behalf of those who do not possess it, amiability remains an attractive quality, and Matthew Austin's liking for this spoilt child of Fortune ripened into friendship all the more rapidly because it was reciprocated. It was, perhaps, not absolutely necessary that he should drive out to Wilverton Grange every day during the week that followed ; but he found time to do so, and his visits were hailed with such joy that he was tempted to prolong them to the last available moment. Indeed, it was impossible to help liking and sympathizing with an unfortunate fellow who, after the first day or two, felt perfectly well, yet was condemned to absolute dependence upon others, and kept his temper through it all.

"There is this to be said for your comfort," Matthew remarked one afternoon, "that you will be out and about again a good deal sooner than most men would, because you don't fuss and fret."

"Oh, I daren't," returned the other, laughing ; "I'm like the blind, who are always supposed to be such nice, cheery sort of people. They know very well that it would be as much as their place was worth to be anything else. If only I had the free use of my arms my language would be something awful ; but as it is I'm bound to be polite to a charitable man like you or I should lose the only jolly hour out of the twenty-four. Just you wait until I cease to be a mummy, and see if I don't punch your head for you !"

"It will be some little time before your arms are strong enough to do that, you will find," observed Matthew.

"Will it? Then perhaps I'll let you off. More especially as I am under some slight obligations to you. I'll tell you what it is, Austin; you may not be aware of it, and I don't suppose you are, but you are one of the very best fellows that ever stepped."

"Because I sit and talk to you when I can?"

"Well, that is one sign; but you have betrayed yourself in other ways. You will never make your fortune, my dear Austin—it is easy to foresee that—but you will always have just as many friends as patients, which is probably what you would prefer."

The two men had become intimate, and had learnt a good deal about one another during those daily hours of companionship, which had not once been intruded upon by the master of the house. Of that eccentric recluse Matthew had seen nothing more, while he understood that his patient had seen very little; but on this occasion, just after the doctor had risen to depart, there came a smart rap upon the door from a stick, followed by the entrance of Mr. Litton.

The old man advanced towards the fire, held out a small, wasted hand to Matthew, and then, turning to his nephew, said rather coldly,—

"I hope you are better to-day."

"Oh, I'm getting on, thanks," answered Leonard.

"I am glad to hear it. This will put a stop to your hunting for the remainder of the season, I presume."

"Well, I suppose so. It can't be helped."

"It might have been helped; but that, to be sure, is your affair rather than mine. You will now, I should think, have had enough of balancing yourself on the top of a wheel, in emulation of shop-boys on Saturday afternoons; so that you are, perhaps, to be congratulated on your experience. It is a pity that you should be deprived of hunting though. Hunting is not an intellectual amusement, but it is certainly preferable

to gambling at Monte Carlo, which is the only alternative I know of open to a man of your tastes during the latter part of the winter."

"What a charming way you have of putting things! As a mere matter of detail, I have only once been to Monte Carlo in my life, and on that occasion I lost the large sum of ten pounds. Still, if it makes you any happier to call me a gambler, pray do so. Any stick is good enough to beat a dog with."

"I believe I am correct in saying that you do gamble. Whether at public or at private tables is not very much to the point."

"All right; I'm a gambler. Now can't we think of something a little more pleasant to talk about?"

But Mr. Litton evidently did not wish to be pleasant. He had—as Matthew divined at the time, and afterwards ascertained for certain—that querulous temperament which is more common amongst women than amongst men, which sometimes goes with physical deformity and which seeks quarrels rather in the hope of a subsequent reconciliation than out of any ill-will towards the person quarrelled with. Such a man was naturally incomprehensible to a robust young athlete like Leonard Jerome, who saw no fun in snapping and snarling, and who, if his uncle had been poor instead of rich, would doubtless have turned his back finally upon that cross-grained relative long ago.

There was more snapping and snarling in the course of the next five minutes than could be listened to with comfort. Of course, young people resent injustice—not having yet had time to learn that injustice must be accepted, with a shrug, as one of the unavoidable accompaniments of terrestrial existence—and although Mr. Litton deserved the disrespectful retorts that he received, it was rather painful to notice how he winced under them. Matthew, being fond of young Jerome, wanted to get away, and took the first opportunity of making his escape. But hardly had he closed the door behind him when it was reopened to give egress to Mr.

Litton, who struck his stick sharply upon the floor to attract the retreating doctor's attention, and then beckoned him back.

"Are you in a hurry?" the old man asked. "If not, I should be glad to have a word or two with you. Did you, by chance, read last week's *Lancet*?"

Matthew had read it, and had also perused an article upon which, to his surprise, Mr. Litton began to talk with evident knowledge of his subject. The article in question had dealt with the treatment of a rare and obscure malady, and Mr. Litton gave reasons for differing from the writer which, if not altogether novel, were entitled to consideration.

"Why, you are almost as well posted up as I am!" Matthew exclaimed in astonishment. "When did you study medicine?"

"In my spare moments, which are only too numerous. The greater part of my long life has been made up of spare moments, and I have studied many arts and sciences—to very little purpose. A few months of practical experience outweigh years of laborious reading. That is why I wanted to ask you whether, in any of the London hospitals, you had come across a case of the kind described. You used, I know, to do a good deal of hospital work before you got that nasty scratch which so nearly put a stop to your investigations for good and all."

Nevertheless, it was not for the sake of adding to his store of medical erudition that Mr. Litton was detaining the young doctor, with whose history and present mode of life he incidentally displayed a somewhat startling familiarity. Matthew divined that much after professional topics had been dropped and he had been conducted into his host's picture-gallery, where there were some fine examples of the early Italian and Flemish schools. He was, likewise, acute enough to guess what was coming; and it came when Mr. Litton had proved himself as well acquainted with the technicalities of the pictorial art as with several other subjects which had cropped up in the course of his monologue.

"I see," the old gentleman remarked at length, "that you have a receptive mind. You don't know much about art, but you would like to know more, and you recognize that our bodies are not the most important part of us—though a physician might be excused, if anybody could, for thinking so. I wish you could manage to impart a few germs of infection to that nephew of mine!"

"Oh, he is young yet," answered Matthew. "His mind won't serve him any the worse in years to come because he is sensible enough to keep his body in good condition now. He will do, Mr. Litton."

"No, he won't," returned the other sharply. "At least, I doubt very much whether he will. Do you imagine that he is one of those brainless, good-tempered, muscular youths who sow their wild oats in due course and settle down into useful, steady-going country gentlemen? If you do, you are a worse judge of character than I should have taken you for. No, Mr. Austin; Leonard Jerome is no fool, and it follows that he can't fool away his youth with impunity. I don't mind telling you another thing: he won't be allowed to fool away my money after I am gone, much as he would enjoy doing so."

"But is he fooling away his youth?" Matthew asked.

"That is a matter of opinion. I call it folly, and worse than folly, to live only for self-indulgence and for so-called sport. I grant you that an ass may do that without particularly suffering from it; but Leonard has talents, and if he doesn't choose to use them he will assuredly end by misusing them. Nemesis is not a mythical goddess—or rather, her existence rests upon the truth, which is the foundation of all myths. Why isn't he in Parliament? He might be, if he cared to take the necessary steps and go through the necessary preliminary training. But I need not ask you why, since I know. It is because he is too lazy and too selfish."

"I think you are rather hard upon him," Matthew said.

"You won't think so when you know him better. I

can see that you and Leonard are going to be friends, Mr. Austin, which is my reason for speaking to you in this way. You may have some influence over him, and you may advance his worldly prospects by exercising it judiciously. I need scarcely tell you that he is only here with a view to the advancement of his worldly prospects. My poor house would not often have the privilege of sheltering him if he thought that I intended to bequeath all I possess to public institutions and charities—a thing which I may very possibly do, by the way.”

“It is a great pity,” Matthew observed musingly, “to be so suspicious. Suspicions of that kind have a tendency to bring about their own justification—just as a man may make himself genuinely ill by morbid fears of illness. You ought to fight against them instead of nursing them.”

Mr. Litton stared. He was quite unaccustomed to being addressed with so much freedom, and he was not sure that he liked it. He ended, however, by breaking into a short laugh and remarking,—

“You are not greatly in awe of me, Mr. Austin, it seems.”

“Why should I be?” Matthew asked, with a pleasant smile.

“Ah, that I can’t tell you; only most people are. Even my nephew is afraid of me; though there isn’t much reverence connected with his fear, I suspect. No doubt he has told you, in well-chosen language, how profoundly he dislikes me, and how he wishes that I would die and have done with it.”

This was a rather awkward question to answer, backed up as it was by the steady gaze of a pair of penetrating grey eyes; but Matthew could reply truthfully,—

“He has never expressed any wish for your death in my presence. I believe he is under the impression that you have a profound dislike for him; and it isn’t very surprising that he should be under that impression, is it?”

“Possibly not. Well, Mr. Austin, I won’t keep you any longer. Will you permit me—as an old man, who

may claim the privilege of taking certain liberties—to say that, whether I like or dislike my nephew, I like you? I shall always be glad to see you, and my library contains a number of medical works which you might perchance care to consult at one time or another. As to Leonard, I dare say you will not forget what I have said about the probable effect of your influence upon him.”

Matthew went away half amused and half touched. Neither his influence nor anybody else's could ever reconcile two natures so antagonistic as those of Mr. Litton and Leonard Jerome; but the simplicity with which the lonely old man had disclosed his craving for an affection which was certain to be denied him was pathetic enough, and it seemed at least possible that some *modus vivendi* might be brought about which would enable him to sign, with a clear conscience, the will that he so evidently desired to execute. Meanwhile, the confidences of the uncle and the nephew gave a fresh interest in life to one whose solicitude about the affairs of other people had become slightly diminished of late by an unwonted difficulty in forgetting his own.

CHAPTER XII.

PHILOSOPHY AND PERVERSITY.

It stood to reason—or, at all events, Matthew Austin thought it did—that such a girl as Lilian Murray could by no possibility fall in love with a man of his age, pursuits, and social position. Even supposing that, by some miracle or other, she should come to imagine herself in love with him, it would be out of the question for him to take advantage of a childish illusion. Nothing could be more obvious than that, before making up her mind, she must see the world and its inhabitants, make acquaintance with young men who belonged to her own small section of the community and realize—as no doubt she would—that she had hitherto lived in blank ignorance of certain indisputable facts.

But he had to repeat these reflections to himself with great frequency and insistence, because Lilian's demeanour towards him was not at all unlike what it might have been if she had suspected his feelings and had returned them. During those weeks when he had good-naturedly devoted all the time that he could spare to chatting with Leonard Jerome he had not, of course, neglected Lady Sara, whose progress towards recovery, though well maintained, had been somewhat slow, and, as a natural consequence, his interviews with Lady Sara's daughter had been of daily occurrence. In after years he looked back upon those interviews with a queer sort of wonder and sense of unreality. It is trite enough moralizing to say that we change as we grow older, and that, although we continue to bear the same name and carry about with us a body which is more or less the same, we are no longer the same men and women that we were five or ten years ago. Yet nobody quite

believes this, and everybody is apt to be startled when the fact is abruptly brought under his or her notice—which, to be sure, very seldom happens.

Anyhow, that was a happy time for Matthew, notwithstanding the misgivings which he was quite right to entertain, and even the occasional moments of self-reproach which would have been more of a trouble to him had he been less free from personal vanity. Doctors and clerics are accustomed to being adored by women. They make mental deductions, unless they are downright fools, and know, or ought to know, pretty well what such adoration is worth. Probably, however, it is not altogether disagreeable while it lasts.

Now, by way of changing a subject which, if persisted with too long, became a little trying to his modesty, Matthew was wont to talk to these ladies about such of his patients as he thought likely to interest them, and chief among the number was, as may be supposed, the luckless Mr. Jerome, with whom Lady Sara in particular manifested much sympathy, not unmingled with curiosity.

“You really must introduce him to me as soon as he and I are in a state to be introduced to one another,” she said. “From what you tell me, I am sure he is just the sort of young man I should like.” She added, with a slight laugh, “Perhaps—who knows?—he may also be the sort of young man whom Lilian would like. And when he succeeds his uncle he will be rich, will he not?”

Matthew did not wince. He had been inured to speculations of that kind by many previous speeches of a similar nature, and he only replied,—

“Well, as I have told you, it isn’t certain yet that he will succeed his uncle. I haven’t a doubt that you will both like him though, and I will try to arrange a meeting by-and-by. Would you, when you are able to leave the house, care to come and look at my azaleas some day? If so, I might exhibit Jerome at the same time.”

Lady Sara said that would be delightful, while Lilian,

on being subsequently informed of the treat in store for her, remarked that there would be no harm in having a fourth person.

"He will do to amuse mamma while you and I poke about the house and the garden," said she. "I am dying to see your house. I know it will be charming, like everything else about you."

Matthew laughed and replied that the house really was charming, although nobody had told him before that everything else about him was.

"But it will be more in accordance with the fitness of things that I should entertain your mother," he continued. "You and Jerome will have my full leave to poke about the premises to your heart's content."

"If you dare to treat me in that way," the girl returned, quite as much in earnest as in joke, "I will never forgive you! I *hate* young men! They always think it their duty to talk nonsense to young women, even when they could talk sense if they chose. And that isn't always."

"You won't find them so hateful when you have seen a little more of them," Matthew observed tranquilly.

Nevertheless, he could not help being glad that Lilian was not consumed with anxiety to meet this particular young man, and he left the house in one of those elated moods to which he had become subject, despite his conviction that there was nothing to be elated about. A more reasonable cause for satisfaction awaited him on his return home, in the shape of a letter from his brother, who had apparently developed a patronizing sort of interest in Spencer Frere, and who wrote to say that very encouraging reports had reached him with reference to that scapegrace. Sir Godfrey had good reason to believe—so he stated—that in six months' time, or possibly even sooner, the wished-for commission would be made out. He thought the young man's friends might be glad to hear this.

One of them, no doubt, would; and Matthew was a little ashamed of himself when he remembered how long

it was since he had held any communication, direct or indirect, with her; because repeated refusals to dine with her parents could scarcely be counted as even indirect communications with Miss Frere. He had been obliged to decline those invitations, which had included an entreaty that he would spend a part of Christmas Day with his hospitable friends; his time had been so fully occupied that it had been out of the question for him to eat his meals at regular hours—much more so to eat them in other people's houses. But the real truth was that he had almost forgotten Anne Frere; and that was why he now took himself to task, wondering what excuse he could trump up to secure a few minutes of private conversation with her.

His good luck and poor Mr. Frere's misfortune solved that problem for him nearly as soon as he had began to debate it. A heated groom from Hayes Park brought him a note, adorned and emphasized by many italics, in which Mrs. Frere besought him to come to her aid without delay.

"George has got one of his *very* bad fits of gout," the distressed lady wrote, "and is literally *roaring* with it! I don't suppose you can do much, for I know by experience that nobody can, but I think it would relieve him a little to swear at you, and I am *sure* you won't mind if he does. I have entreated him to swear at me, but he seems to doubt whether that would be right—which, of course, it wouldn't. Besides, it is just possible, after all, that you may be able to recommend something. So do, *please*, come as soon as you can."

Matthew responded to this pathetic appeal with all possible dispatch; and if he was not actually sworn at by the prostrate sufferer, he was given to understand in so many words that he and all the other members of an honourable profession were no better than a pack of charlatans.

"God bless my soul!" Mr. Frere exclaimed, "I don't

want to be told that I must have patience. As if I didn't know that! Why, I'm a monument of patience—an overturned monument—ask my wife if I ain't! What I want is something to relieve me of this infernal agony, and there isn't one of you who understands his trade well enough to give me what I want. Well, there!—I didn't mean that, my dear Austin; you mustn't mind me. I dare say you understand, at all events, that a man isn't responsible for his language when he is being tortured as I am now."

"Oh, but we are not quite so incompetent as you make us out," Matthew answered cheerfully. "I can promise you relief in a very short time, and when this bout is over—as it soon will be—you will feel all the better for it."

The terrible ladies who, a few years ago, used to be so fond of grabbing reluctant acquaintances by the wrist and, after a solemn scrutiny of palm and fingers, announcing what his or her proclivities were, professed in a great many instances to have discovered the existence of a "healing hand." Perhaps not a large number of the persons to whom this mysterious virtue was ascribed really possessed it; but Matthew Austin ought certainly to have been included in that select band. It was always said of him in his hospital days that his touch seemed to soothe where that of his colleagues necessarily gave pain; and Mr. Frere wonderingly admitted as much after the medicated wool, in which his foot was swathed, had been removed and replaced.

"I don't know how on earth you manage it, Austin," the old gentleman said, "but you have positively made me easier, instead of hurting me. Even Anne can't do what you did just now without hurting me like the devil, and Anne is the only person in the house who is fit to come near a gouty patient."

"Is it she who nurses you?" Matthew inquired, hoping that, in that case, it would not be long before she made her appearance.

"She does little things for me; I'm not quite reduced

to the necessity of having a nurse yet," answered Mr. Frere, who was still rather cross and ready to take offence, though less disposed to execrate the whole race of doctors than he had been a few minutes before. "But I must say for Anne that she tries her best with everything that she undertakes. You may have noticed that."

"Yes, I have noticed that. She has strong affections, too, I should say."

"Oh, all women have strong affections; the trouble is that they are apt to bestow them unworthily. Anne herself—but I dare say you have heard something, and I don't care to talk about it. Only I know rather more than she imagines."

Matthew, thinking that he saw his opportunity, ventured to begin,—

"If you are alluding to your son——"

"Ah," interrupted Mr. Frere, speaking in a quiet, decided voice, very unlike that which was habitual to him, "I suspected that she had mentioned her brother to you. That is why I introduced the subject. Now, I want you to understand, Austin, once for all, that it's a forbidden subject. Anne knows that; but I am afraid she thinks I may be got at in roundabout ways—which is quite a mistake. I have my reasons for acting as I have done, and if you and others set me down as a hard-hearted old brute, I can't help it. Now, we'll say no more about the matter, please."

Thus it is that human nature is wont to turn its back upon itself and perplex the painstaking student. Mr. Frere's words were words of wisdom, but really they should not by rights have proceeded out of the mouth of a choleric old gentleman whose head ought to have been as soft as the heart which he had proclaimed his willingness to hear called hard. In any case, Matthew could but bow to his request and say no more. He remained by the bedside as long as there was any excuse for remaining; but since Anne neither showed herself, nor was apparently expected to do so, he had to take his leave at length.

"I'll swallow your stuff, though I don't suppose it will do me one atom of good," was Mr. Frere's valedictory remark. "If you come across my daughter on your way out you might just mention that I haven't been able to read the *Times* yet, because of the infernal crackling that it makes when I try to hold it up to the light."

As a matter of fact, Matthew did come across one of Mr. Frere's daughters before he had advanced very far along the corridor; only, unfortunately, it was not the right one. Maggie bounced out from the ambush where she had been patiently lying in wait, and, catching him by the arm, implored him to come to the schoolroom with her just for five minutes.

"Backfisch is away for her Christmas holidays," she explained, "and we have been having a dog-wash. You ought to see them all before they get dirty again. Anne has just finished brushing Snap, and you can't think how funny he looks after he has been brushed!—you won't know his head from his tail. Besides, Anne particularly wants to see you."

This latter statement may or may not have been true, and was, at all events, quite unauthorized; but it had the desired effect. Matthew gladly consented to be led off to the schoolroom, where there was no light save that of a roaring fire, in front of which Anne, on her knees and with her sleeves rolled up above her elbows, was putting the finishing touches to the toilet of Snap, the Skye terrier. Other dogs of various breeds, who had already been subjected to the same painful process of dressing, were grouped round her and were listening, with cocked ears and saturnine amusement, to the snarls and protests of the victim. They all with one consent turned and flew at him on his entrance, while Snap hastened to seek shelter under the nearest bookcase.

"I ought to apologize for this intrusion," Matthew said, as soon as he could make himself heard above the din, and when Maggie, by dint of vigorous flips with a wet towel, had dispersed her excited pack of pets, "but

I was dragged here by main force, whether I would or not."

Anne had scrambled to her feet and was hastily pulling down her sleeves. She wore a long, brown-holland apron, her fair hair was disarranged, her cheeks were slightly flushed, and Matthew could not help noticing how handsome she looked, although at that time he had practically no eyes for more than one variety of feminine beauty or more than one possessor of it. But, if Anne looked handsome, she certainly did not look as if she particularly wanted to see him, nor was her reply of a nature to bear out her sister's assertion.

"Maggie can't realize that what is a treat to her isn't necessarily a treat to other people," she said, with an annoyed, constrained laugh. "I am sorry that she has forced you behind the scenes against your will. However——"

"Oh, but indeed it wasn't at all against my will," interrupted Matthew eagerly, before the discourteous intimation which was evidently upon the tip of Anne's tongue could find articulate expression. "On the contrary, I was looking out for you to give you a message from your father. I was to say that he can't read the newspaper for himself, on account of the rustling of the leaves, which gets upon his nerves, and——"

"Oh, very well," answered Anne, interrupting in her turn. "Thank you for telling me. I will go to him at once;" and she made straight for the door.

But Matthew could not let her escape him in that way. He hastened after her, pacifying the loudly protesting Maggie by the promise of a speedy return, and, catching up the fugitive in the passage, said,—

"Please don't run away until I have read you an extract from Godfrey's last letter about your brother. I thought you would like to hear what he says."

She was, of course, glad to be made acquainted with the hopeful terms of which Sir Godfrey had made use, and she said as much when Matthew had folded up the letter again; but she spoke so coldly and curtly that

he ventured to inquire, with a faint intonation of reproach,—

“Is anything the matter? Have I offended you in any way?”

“Oh, dear, no!” she returned, with the same vexed, unmirthful laugh which had jarred upon his ear a few minutes before; “how could you have offended me, when I haven’t even seen you for weeks? *Vous tombez mal*—that is all. I am in what Maggie calls one of my beastly moods, and I couldn’t be civil to the Queen herself while they last.”

“I am sorry for that,” said Matthew, “because I suppose a beastly mood means an unsociable mood, and I was just going to beg you to do something sociable.”

“What—again! I should have thought that the striking success that I made of it last time would have convinced you of my hopeless unsociability. Were you about to invite me to meet Lady Sara Murray and her daughter at tea?”

“There is no use in denying that I was,” answered Matthew, with a deprecating laugh. “I wish you liked them; but as you don’t it can’t be helped; and, after all, it was not so much them whom I wanted you to meet as a young fellow named Jerome, whom I have been attending since he smashed himself up a short time ago. I am almost sure you would like him, because I don’t see how anybody could help liking him.”

He gave a brief account of Leonard’s mishap and of his consequent intimacy with the sufferer, to which Miss Frere listened rather inattentively. She knew quite well who Mr. Jerome was, it appeared, but she had as yet had no opportunity of making his personal acquaintance, and she gave much the same reason as Lilian Murray had done for declining that held out to her.

“I don’t like young men, and they don’t like me,” she said; “we never by any chance get on together. So please don’t think me rude for begging to be excused. I should only be a wet blanket and spoil your party if I joined it. As it is, you will be four—which is quite

the right number, for I hear that you have snatched Lady Sara back from the brink of the grave to act as chaperon a little longer. By the way, I ought to have congratulated you upon that achievement of yours: everybody is talking about it."

Matthew glanced half-wonderingly, half-resentfully at the speaker; he had supposed that Anne Frere was above the petty spitefulness which is commonly attributed to all women.

"I don't want to be congratulated in that tone of voice," he said. "It *was* an achievement, and I am proud of it; but I really didn't do what in me lay to keep Lady Sara Murray alive for the purpose that you mention."

"Did I not tell you that I am incapable of civility to-day! You had much better go away before I commit some further solecism in good manners; and I am sure you ought to be grateful to me for resisting the temptation to make a fifth at your tea-party. Probably you are."

Perhaps he was. At all events, he was more hurt and provoked than a philosopher should have been, and for the moment he felt that he decidedly preferred the society of Maggie and the dogs to that of a young woman who seemed bent upon saying disagreeable things out of sheer perversity.

CHAPTER XIII.

LEONARD GIVES HIS OPINION.

SOMETIMES, after the turn of the year, and long before the spring, there come to us dwellers in a northern island, of which the rigorous climate is mitigated by that ever-blessed Gulf Stream, a few days so mild and soft and sunshiny that they seem to have been plucked by mistake out of the brief coming summer which is our due. Birds begin to chirp and twitter, windows are thrown open, fires are allowed to burn low, and the half-forgotten smell of the moist earth greets our expanded nostrils.

Well, we all know what that means. Presently the wind will work round by north to east, where it will stick for six weeks without a break; the winter is only playing with us; the worst of our miseries are yet to come, and it is ten to one that every man and woman whom we meet in the course of the day will accost us with the same sagacious observation—"Ah, we shall pay for this later on!"

Such, indeed, was the original and novel remark which Leonard Jerome had just made one fine afternoon to his friend and medical adviser, in whose pretty, old-fashioned drawing-room he was lounging at his ease, with one hand in his pocket and his long legs stretched out before him. Of his legs he had for some time past enjoyed the full use, and although one of his arms was still in a sling, the other had recently been set free. Long confinement to the house had toned down the usual ruddy brownness of his complexion; but this pallor was not unbecoming, and, taking him altogether, his appearance was of a nature to reflect credit both upon his doctor and upon the friend who was about to exhibit him to a couple of expectant ladies.

"The future may pretty generally be counted upon to take its revenge on the present," Matthew said in answer to his gloomy forecast. "Why not make the best of good times while they last?"

He was thinking of other things besides the weather as he spoke. His good time, he very well knew, was irrevocably destined to be short, and it was not always that he could manage to act upon his own excellent advice. Still, he had at least one small matter for self-congratulation in that neither frost nor rain nor snow had intervened to put a stop to his little tea-party. A less disinterested or a more apprehensive man might not have been in so great a hurry to introduce the handsome and eligible Mr. Jerome to the object of his affections; but Matthew flattered himself that he had no silly illusions. Leonard Jerome or another—what did it matter to him, since it was obvious that a provincial practitioner could never stand in the position of a rival to Lilian's suitor or suitors?

"I hope that old Lady Sara of yours won't expect a one-armed man to trundle her round the garden in her Bath chair," Leonard was beginning, when the door was thrown open and the subject of his groundless alarm walked in.

Lady Sara, who was now almost as well as she had been before her dangerous illness, scarcely looked like an invalid. Always well dressed, carrying herself gracefully, and retaining as she did perceptible vestiges of the beauty for which she had been famous in years gone by, she could hardly fail to produce a favourable impression upon a stranger. But, of course, it was not upon her that the gaze of this admiring and astonished stranger became instantly riveted. Matthew saw that, and experienced a momentary sensation of pain on witnessing what he saw; but after all, it was only what he had been fully prepared for, and for that matter had desired. He would have been much disappointed if Leonard Jerome had not admired Miss Murray. When the necessary introductions had been effected, and the inquiries and condolences which the occasion called for had been interchanged, he said briskly,—

"Now, shall we have tea first and flowers afterwards, or will you come out into the garden at once? I can allow you to choose, Lady Sara, because, on such an

afternoon as this, I shan't feel it my duty to pack you off home for another hour and a half."

Lady Sara replied that, under those circumstances, she would have her tea.

"I want to look about me before I do anything else," she said. "What a dear old room, and what a number of pretty things you have got! Is that a Bartolozzi?"

She moved away to examine the engraving which had attracted her attention, and proceeded to inspect Matthew's modest stock of treasures, taking her host with her, and leaving—perhaps not altogether without design—the two younger people to entertain one another. The young people, however, did not seem to be particularly eager to fall in with her wishes. Some few observations they must have exchanged, but it was not long before Matthew became aware that Lilian was at his elbow, and while the tea was being carried in she took occasion to say to him in an agitated whisper,—

"Freeze to me!—don't leave me for a moment! I won't perambulate the garden for three-quarters of an hour with that masher!"

"You will like him very much when you have talked a little more to him," returned Matthew in amused and subdued accents; "he is as far removed from being a masher as I am. A more manly, unaffected young fellow I never met, and——"

"Oh yes," interrupted the girl impatiently, "I dare say he is all that, and he is right enough with other men, and just now he is wearing his country clothes. But I can see him in a frockcoat and a tall hat, all the same, and I don't want to be bothered with him. *Please* hand him over to mamma; they are sure to have any number of common acquaintances, and they will get on together splendidly."

It is all very well to assert that the path of duty is not invariably unpleasant, and that to do what is distasteful to us is not necessarily to perform a meritorious action; but we are all firmly convinced of the contrary—nor could Matthew doubt that he was bound to dis-

regard this seductive entreaty. His place, beyond all question, was by Lady Sara's side, and he gallantly claimed it. After tea—which informal repast, somehow or other, afforded fewer opportunities for the development of informality than might have been hoped for—she accepted the support of his proffered arm, and he led her forth into the cool greenhouse, Leonard and Lilian following closely in the wake of the couple, and displaying marked anxiety to be included in the general conversation. It was ridiculous of them to behave in that way; still, so long as they chose to do it, nobody could prevent them; and their entertainer, by reason of the frailty of his moral nature, was more tickled than provoked with their conduct.

But they could not possibly keep it up. Even if Bush, who was in attendance, had been less long-winded and Lady Sara less ecstatically loquacious, the obstinate silence with which their occasional diffident comments upon a subject about which neither of them knew anything at all were received, must eventually have forced them back upon one another, and their mutual animosity had already undergone some diminution before Lady Sara, after minutely examining the fragrant blooms in the stovehouse, announced, with every appearance of regret, that she was too tired to walk round the grounds.

"I shall go back to the drawing-room and wait for you, while Mr. Austin does the honours," said she. "Don't think of hurrying; I can make myself quite happy with a book."

Naturally, Matthew protested that his notion of doing the honours was to remain with his chief guest, adding that "the grounds" were not so extensive as to require a guide; naturally, also, Lilian felt that it would be hardly polite to avow the absolute indifference with which she regarded Mr. Austin's cherished shrubs. So her ladyship carried her point, after all—a point to which, in truth, she attached scanty importance. Only, as the mother of a marriageable daughter, she felt it incumbent upon her to neglect no chance that might turn up.

"Your young friend is handsome, but scarcely brilliant," she remarked on her way back towards the house. "I should think there was no fear of his being disinherited. Why should anybody wish to disinherit such a nice, gentleman-like, commonplace sort of person?"

Perhaps that was not quite the light in which Lilian saw Mr. Jerome; assuredly it was not the light in which that young man was accustomed to see himself. Anyhow, his first remark to his companion, while they paced somewhat sullenly side by side down one of the gravel paths, could not fairly be stigmatized as commonplace.

"May I ask," he began, "whether I have been unfortunate enough to strike you as more objectionable and offensive than the ordinary run of casual acquaintances?"

She thought it decidedly objectionable and offensive on his part to put such a question; but, being as yet unversed in the art of fine innuendo, could hit upon no other rejoinder than the rather bald and curt one of "Not at all."

"I am glad of that; because I was afraid, from the savage manner in which you have been snubbing me all this time, that I had unintentionally done something that you couldn't forgive."

"That is nonsense," returned Lilian impatiently. "You are much too well satisfied with yourself to have been afraid of anything of the sort; and if I had really snubbed you, you would have turned your back upon me at once and begun to talk to my mother. Why didn't you?"

"Ah, now we are getting at it; now one begins to perceive what one's offence has been! Well, really, Miss Murray, it was no fault of mine. I don't want to be rude, but the unvarnished truth is that I would quite as soon have talked to your mother as to you, if only I had been allowed. Dense, as I have no doubt you think me, I have intelligence enough to understand that you came here to see our friend Austin, not me."

"You would indeed have been dense if you had imagined that I came here to see you," Lilian rejoined,

with an angry laugh, for at this period of her life she had not learned to disguise her emotions, and did not in the least care how rude she might appear to a young man whom she had rather hastily set down as supercilious and conceited. She went on to say, in a needlessly defiant tone, "Mr. Austin is a very great friend of ours. He saved my mother's life, and he has been kindness itself to us ever since we came here. I don't believe there is anybody else in the world like him."

"Then we have at least found one subject upon which we are of the same mind," remarked Leonard good-humouredly, "for Austin is a very great friend of mine too, and I agree with you in doubting whether there is anybody else in the world quite like him. I can't say that he has saved my life, but that is only because I haven't given him the chance; and as for kindness, I have had as much of that from him as I can carry. Don't you think we might make friends—you and I—upon the strength of our common affection for a third person? It would be more comfortable if we could, because I suppose we are bound to spend a short time together in examining the third person's outdoor plants. He is sure to catechize us about them when we go in."

"Very well; it need not take us long, I should think," was Lilian's somewhat ungracious response to these overtures.

But, as a matter of fact, their stroll over the two modest acres which were enclosed by Mr. Austin's garden fence did last a good deal longer than one of them was aware of. Leonard Jerome had never earned, nor desired to earn, the odious reputation of a lady-killer; still, he had all his life been accustomed to be a favourite with the opposite sex, and he was not unnaturally piqued by the disdain with which the beautiful Miss Murray had seen fit to treat him so far. He felt that he owed it to himself to convince her that she was under some misapprehension or other, and in truth the task of putting her into a better humour proved to be no very hard one. He talked so simply, boyishly, and pleasantly that she

soon had to change her opinion of him ; he did not brag of his prowess in field-sports or his intimate knowledge of smart society, as she had felt certain that he would do ; and if his conversation was a trifle egotistical, it was not the less interesting on that account. There are people who can discourse quite charmingly about themselves—who, in fact, cannot discourse with anything approaching the same charm upon other topics. So Lilian heard the whole—or, at any rate, as much as could be related to her—of Mr. Jerome's personal history, was informed that he possessed a place in the far north where he supposed he would have to take up his residence some fine day, learnt that he was not nearly as well off as he would like to be, and was candidly told that he based great hopes, not unmingled with misgivings, upon the provisions of his uncle's will.

"The worst of it is," said he, "that one never knows what to be at with Uncle Richard. Sometimes he growls at me for not being in Parliament, or making some other good use of what he is pleased to call my talents ; and then, when I least expect it, he'll turn round upon me and abuse me for spending a couple of months in London when I might have been leading a healthy life in the country. It takes more patience than I can boast of to put up with him. However, we have got on rather better together of late—thanks to dear old Austin, who stands between us and strokes us both down. Austin has quite won my uncle's heart."

"I don't wonder at that," remarked Lilian.

"I expect you would wonder a little if you knew Uncle Richard. I am not surprised at Austin's winning any quantity of other hearts though."

Leonard concluded his sentence with a sigh, to which Miss Murray took instant exception.

"Oh, if you mean that he is lucky to be so popular, you understand very little about it," said she. "You can have the same luck and the same popularity whenever you like. All you have to do is to be as good and kind and unselfish as he is."

"That is all, is it? Then, luckless and unpopular I shall remain to the end of my days, I am afraid. The only consolation is that nine-tenths of the human race must be in the same boat with me. Even you yourself, perhaps."

"Oh, I don't pretend to be anything but thoroughly selfish, and I don't think I particularly care about being popular," answered the girl. "Hadn't we better go in now?"

A quarter of an hour later Matthew was walking across the fields towards Wilverton Grange with his young friend, whom he had undertaken to see part of the way home. Lady Sara, laden with the flowers which Bush, in obedience to orders, had reluctantly cut for her, had been wheeled away in her Bath chair, after taking a very cordial leave of her entertainer and her fellow-guest. She had begged the latter to call upon her any afternoon when he should have nothing better to do, and he had accepted the invitation with eager alacrity. Just now he was eulogizing Miss Murray's beauty in unmeasured terms.

"The most beautiful girl I have ever seen in all my life, bar none!" he declared emphatically.

"Ah, I was pretty sure that you would think so," Matthew observed, with a laugh which did not sound altogether merry.

"Well, *you* think so too, don't you?"

"Oh yes; I think so too."

"Mind you, I don't say she is quite the nicest girl I have ever met; though she may even be that to other people, for anything that I know to the contrary. But not to me. Oh no, she took very good care not to be nice to me, which was rather unkind of her, considering what a lot of trouble I took to be nice to her. Was I to blame for not being Matthew Austin, M.D., or for having been ordered by Matthew Austin, M.D., to perambulate a damp garden with her, when I would much sooner have been sitting before the fire?"

"I am not entitled to write M.D. after my name, and you are not entitled to shirk the duties that belong to your age," Matthew answered. "Not that I believe for

one moment that you wished to shirk them. Was it for Lady Sara's sake that you jumped with such avidity at her permission to you to call in Prospect Place?"

"I am sorry, my dear Austin," said the younger man, "to notice in you a tendency towards humbug, which I had imagined to be foreign to your character. I trust it is only humbug. I trust it isn't the jealousy which it pretends to be. Because if it were I should have to write you down not as an M.D. but as a D.D. ass."

"Jealousy!—at my age!"

"Oh, that puts the matter beyond a doubt; if you weren't a horrid old humbug, you wouldn't begin to talk about your age. Why, what are you?—five-and-thirty?"

"Not quite so much; but I dare say I look more, and I know I often feel more. Anyhow, I am centuries older than Miss Murray; added to which, I am her mother's physician, and a mere nobody in point of rank. By all means call me an ass, if you like; but please acquit me of having been such an ass as to fix my provincial and medical affections upon a young lady who is not unlikely to figure as one of the fashionable beauties of the coming London season."

Leonard did not reply at once; the two men were just then walking in single file through a copse, traversed by a narrow footpath. But when they emerged into a pasture, he laid his one available hand upon Matthew's shoulder, and said,—

"Now, look here, old chap; we've been pretty good friends, haven't we?—and I don't see the use of making mysteries. Of course I don't want you to tell me anything that you would prefer to keep to yourself; only, you know, you did virtually tell me everything some time ago."

"I told you everything? I don't know what you mean!" ejaculated Matthew, in honest bewilderment.

"Why, my dear man, you weren't under the impression that you hadn't betrayed yourself a hundred times, were you? I didn't respond as I might have done, because I wanted to have a look at the young woman

first. Well, I have had a look at her now, and I congratulate you. Rubbish about your age and your rank! You are every bit as good as she is in one sense, and a great deal better in another. Her mother, I grant you, may not be of that opinion just at first; but what then? It will be all right, so long as you don't insist upon depreciating yourself to them. It's a mistake to depreciate yourself, and a man of your wisdom ought to know it."

Matthew was so taken aback that it was some minutes before he recovered full possession of his faculties. By the time that he had done so he could no longer dispute the accuracy of Leonard Jerome's conjectures; but he gave many good reasons—of which the young man made light—for his determination to keep his secret to himself, so far as Lilian and her mother were concerned.

"And, after all," he concluded, "there is such a thing as absolutely disinterested love. It is possible——"

"Oh no, it isn't," interrupted the other. "You will never get me to believe that; and when you say such things you almost make me doubt whether you are really in love with the girl at all."

"You needn't doubt that. There is no more doubt about my being in love with her than there is about the impossibility of her ever falling in love with me."

"Austin, you exasperate me. I don't want you to walk any farther with me this evening, thanks; I would rather you went back home and considered your ways. If you don't know that Miss Murray simply adores you, all I can say is you ought to know it. But I expect you do, and you are only trying to find out what she said to me about you in the garden. You're a lucky devil; though I'm not going to deny that you deserve your luck. Now good-night—and be hanged to you!"

With that he turned away, and, breaking into a trot, was soon lost to sight in the falling darkness.

"I dare say," muttered Matthew to himself, as he stroked his short beard meditatively, "that, from his point of view, I did seem to be insincere. But, of course, he wouldn't understand."

CHAPTER XIV.

A GRACEFUL RETREAT.

It is possible that when an attack of gout declines to yield to treatment (as it almost invariably does), something may be done towards hastening the sufferer's recovery by means of cheerful conversation and sanguine assurances. Such, at all events, were the remedies employed by Matthew in the case of Mr. Frere, whose enemy released him a full week earlier than usual, and who not unnaturally ascribed to one species of dexterity what was more probably due to another.

"That fellow," he told his wife confidentially, "ought to be at the head of his profession. He has no business to bury himself down here—though I'm sure *I* don't want him to leave us. It's true that there is plenty of money to be made in Wilverton, and he ought to grow rich as soon as he has cut old Jennings out—which he is bound to do sooner or later, whether he wishes it or not. People can't be expected to put up with incompetency out of a sentimental regard for vested interests. Oh, don't throw Litton at my head! Litton, I know, sticks to Jennings, in spite of all that Austin has done for that nephew of his; but, then, Litton hasn't had the gout yet."

Mrs. Frere felt no special interest in Mr. Litton—a surly old curmudgeon with whom it was impossible to maintain neighbourly relations—but her curiosity had been slightly excited with regard to his nephew ever since somebody had told her that that young man had twice been seen to emerge from Lady Sara Murray's door.

"So the Murrays are friends of your friend the broken-boned bicycle-rider, I hear," she took an early oppor-

tunity of remarking to Matthew. "Where did they fall in with him?—in London?"

"No; they met him for the first time at my house," Matthew answered. "I thought it would be a kindness both to them and to Jerome to bring them together, and I wanted Miss Frere to come the same day. However, she wouldn't; she says she dislikes young men."

"Poor, dear Anne! Yes; I am afraid it is only too true that she does *not* like young men, and I live in constant dread of her coming to announce to me that she has accepted an elderly widower, with a large family and a small income. That is just the sort of dreadful thing that Anne would delight in doing, if she got the chance. One can't be thankful enough that all the poverty-stricken paterfamilias hereabouts are blessed with exceptionally robust wives. But wasn't it a little bit imprudent of you to take the responsibility of presenting a more or less interesting youth to that lovely girl?"

"I don't think so. She will have to meet a number of more or less interesting youths before long, you see."

"Yes; but taking them in the lump is quite another affair, and if anything were to happen, her mother would be sure to lay the blame on you. Because, although young Jerome has expectations, he is no great catch as he stands. I think, if I had been you, I should have left it alone."

"You are the last person whom I should have suspected of being so worldly and wary," Matthew said, laughing.

"Ah, I'm like David Copperfield's landlady; 'I'm a mother myself.' When it comes to be a question of daughters and marriages, we are all apt to be worldly; we can't very well help it. Let us hope that Lady Sara is sufficiently so for the purpose."

From what Matthew knew of Lady Sara Murray he thought it probable that her worldliness would prove equal to the occasion; but he did not know as much as Mrs. Frere did about her recent relations with young Jerome, stress of work having prevented him from visit-

ing Prospect Place since the occurrence of the episodes recorded in the last chapter. Leonard's words had made a certain impression upon him, and of course he had thought a good deal about them ; but his common sense had preserved him from taking them too literally. It was easy to understand how the misapprehension had arisen—easy to conjecture that Lilian had made use of more emphatic language in speaking of a man whom she liked than she would have done in speaking of a man whom she loved, and it was not surprising that a young fellow who was doing his best to be agreeable to her should have been spurred by vexation towards erroneous conclusions. If there was one thing of which Matthew was more persuaded than another, it was that he might with perfect safety to himself and others keep up his pleasant intimacy with Lady Sara and her daughter ; and, as he had a spare half-hour that afternoon, he drove straight from Hayes Park to their temporary residence.

He was received by Lilian alone—her mother, as she presently explained, having gone to lie down—and, for all his common sense, he could not but rejoice a little when she upbraided him for having absented himself so long.

"How horrid you are !" she exclaimed. "Every day I have been thinking that you *must* come at last, and four times have I seen you drive past the door without even turning your head ! Is it that you don't care to see us except when we are at the point of death ?"

"No ; it isn't that," answered Matthew simply, "but the number of my patients keeps on increasing, and lately I have had to devote all my little free time to cheering up poor old Mr. Frere, who has had the gout and has been very sorry for himself."

"Bother old Mr. Frere and his gout ! Though I like you all the better for being so kind to everybody—even to gouty old gentlemen. Do you know what your friend Mr. Jerome says about you ? He declares that you have been neglecting us on purpose, lest we should hold the honour of your friendship too cheap."

"My friend Mr. Jerome says a good many silly things. You have seen him then?"

The girl made a grimace.

"Oh yes," she answered; "he has contrived to find one excuse or another for dropping in almost every day since we first met. I have heard a great deal about him, too, both from himself and from mamma's friend, Mrs. Brudenell, who often comes across him in London, it seems. Evidently he is very much sought after, and is fully aware of his own value. He doesn't adopt your system of impressing it upon others though."

"Ah, you are prejudiced; you made up your mind to dislike him from the first."

"No; I like him well enough; only, as I told you, I am not fond of fashionable and conceited young men. One can never feel at one's ease with them, and one is always offending their vanity. However, I will say for Mr. Jerome that he has one redeeming point—he thoroughly appreciates you."

"Does he? Well, I think I appreciate him too. Fashionable he may be, but I don't believe he is conceited; and as for his being young, all I can say is I wish I had half his complaint."

"Do try to break yourself of talking like that!" exclaimed Lilian with an impatient gesture; "you will be young for another ten years at least, and what is the use of making yourself out old before your time? You go on repeating it until people end by taking you at your word. Even mamma speaks as if you were somewhere about her own age, whereas in reality you are just about mine. Men are always ten years younger than women."

Matthew, resolved to adhere to the prudent and unromantic course which he had marked out for himself, was in the act of asserting that middle age overtakes many a man who has not yet entered upon his thirty-second year, when he was interrupted by the entrance of indisputable youth in the person of Mr. Leonard Jerome. Lilian, after giving utterance to an exclamation of annoyance which was perfectly audible, and was

doubtless intended to be so, called out to the retreating housemaid, "Tell Lady Sara, please," while the intruder, having shaken hands with her, turned to Matthew and said,—

"I saw your cart at the door, old man; so I thought I would come in."

"What a very odd reason!" remarked Miss Murray. "Most people, when they see a doctor's carriage at the door, stay outside."

"I apologize," answered the young man, with an assumption of good-humour which was not altogether effectual in masking his chagrin; "I quite understand that I am *de trop*, but the beauty of me is that I shall not be *de trop* much longer. I am off to London tomorrow, Miss Murray, you will be glad to hear; and as I rather want Austin to have a look at my arm before I go, I took the opportunity of killing two birds with one stone by catching him and wishing you good-bye at the same time."

Lilian made no response, but Matthew exclaimed in unaffected concern,—

"My dear fellow, this is very sudden! You haven't been quarrelling with your uncle, I hope?"

"Not more than usual; but it is really time for me to be moving on. Can I execute any commissions for you in town, Miss Murray?"

Lady Sara, who entered the room before Lilian could answer, echoed this query in accents of polite regret.

"In town? I hope that doesn't mean that you are thinking of deserting us, Mr. Jerome?"

"It's awfully nice of you to put it in that way, Lady Sara," the young man made reply, "but I'm afraid I can't flatter myself that my friends here will miss me half as much as I shall miss them. As for my uncle, he has been dead sick of me for a long time past, and it's better to end a visit of one's own accord than to wait until one is told at what hour the train leaves the next morning—don't you think so?"

Lady Sara smiled. She was not particularly eager to

arrange an alliance between her daughter—who might do so very much better—and the potential heir of a well-to-do country gentleman, although she had not felt justified in discouraging what had appeared to her to be advances on Leonard's part.

"I dare say you are longing to get away from this dull place," she remarked. "Of course it must be dreadfully dull for you in your disabled state; and when a man can neither hunt nor shoot, he is better off in London than anywhere else, no doubt."

Some talk upon this not very novel topic of discussion ensued. Lilian took no share in it, and at the end of five minutes or so Leonard rose.

"Have you time to drive me to the Grange and make a last examination of me, Austin?" he asked. "I was on my way to your house, and I meant to leave a note for you if I didn't find you at home."

"Come along," answered Matthew, after consulting his notebook. "I can just manage it if we start at once."

"How tiresome it is of you," Lilian ejaculated in an undertone, while Lady Sara was telling Mr. Jerome that she quite hoped to meet him again later in the year and in livelier scenes; "he can't really want you to look at his arm, and I'm sure you can't want to see it. Now it will be weeks, I suppose, before you deign to honour us with another call."

"I should be here every day if I could consult my own inclinations," Matthew answered with absolute truth. "And I certainly could not think of letting Jerome escape from my hands without a final overhauling. He is not by any means well yet, whatever he may say. Why he should be in such a desperate hurry to get away all of a sudden I can't make out."

Lilian shrugged her shoulders. She meant to imply that she was equally ignorant and indifferent as to Mr. Jerome's motives; but she may not improbably have formed some surmise upon the subject, and it is hardly necessary to add that a somewhat similar conjecture had suggested itself to Matthew's mind.

However, nothing in the semblance of a confession was forthcoming from Leonard during the rapid drive through the twilight that ensued. The young man was in high spirits and very loquacious. He said he presumed there was no reason why he should not get on a horse now, and although he might not be able to follow the hounds, he might go to the meets, potter about the roads and lanes, and see a little of the sport in a country that he knew. If that should prove impracticable, he would manage to amuse himself somehow or other in the metropolis.

"At least one will be amongst one's friends there," he remarked, "and there's always something to be done when one is in touch with civilization. You aren't a native, so I don't mind telling you that I would sooner be shot at once than spend the rest of my days at Wilverton."

"It is a matter of taste," said Matthew. "Personally, I like the place, and I am quite contented here. So would you be, I dare say, if you were in a fit state for field sports. By the way, it would have been prettier on your part to remember that you are leaving at least one friend behind you."

"My dear old chap, you don't suppose I forget that, do you? But, as I say, you're not a native, and of course you won't stay here much longer. You are thrown away in a stupid, provincial watering-place; besides which, Mrs. Austin won't stand it. I am willing to lay a trifle of odds that, in eighteen months or two years' time at the outside, I shall be doing myself the honour to call at some house in Brook Street or Grosvenor Street which will have your name inscribed upon a brass plate on the door."

"The brass plate and the house in Mayfair stand upon much the same plane of probability as the Mrs. Austin, no doubt. No; you will find me here, jogging along just as usual, the next time that Mr. Litton sends for you; but I hope that will not be as much as eighteen months hence."

Leonard only laughed and gave another turn to his companion's thoughts by beginning to talk about his symptoms. The fact was that his injuries had not been limited to a couple of broken bones, so that there was some need for the careful examination of him which Matthew made after they had reached the Grange. At the end of it his friend and physician impressed upon him that for some time to come he would have to keep quiet and avoid making any demand upon forces which were not yet at his disposal.

"If you exercise common prudence, you will be as well as ever before the summer; but if you don't, we may have you upon your back for an indefinite length of time. Mind that. I only wish you would remain where you are for another week or two; you can't very well get into mischief here."

"Can't I though? If I know anything of myself I am one of those people who can get into mischief anywhere, and the devil will have fewer chances of finding work for my idle hands in London than he would here. Oh, I'll be as prudent as you please; I don't want to be an invalid, I assure you. Drop me a line sometimes, will you, like a good fellow? I'm not going to keep you any longer now, because I know you're dying to be off."

Matthew did not stir. He stood for a few moments gazing at the other, with a smile which was half amused, half embarrassed, and wholly affectionate. He had in truth become very fond of his muscular young patient, whom he believed—mistakenly, perhaps—that he could read like a book.

"Jerome," he said at length, "we are not going to part like this; it's absurd. You know well enough that when you asked me to drive you home, it wasn't about your physical condition that you wanted to speak to me."

"Good Lord, man! do you imagine that I feel uneasy about my mental condition?"

"That's just what I do imagine; and it doesn't re-

quire a very vivid imagination to guess why you are taking to your heels so abruptly either. I think you meant to tell me, in case I shouldn't guess, why you had determined to beat a retreat; and then your courage failed you, or else, perhaps, you came to the conclusion that it would be better to hold your tongue. My dear fellow, you needn't hold your tongue, and you needn't take to your heels. There is nothing at all to be ashamed of in what has happened to you. Nobody knows better than I do that falling in love is an involuntary process, and although I thoroughly appreciate your chivalrous scruples, they are misplaced in this instance, believe me. If you and I stood in any sense upon an equal footing the case might be different; but since we don't, you can inflict no injury upon me by staying here and allowing things to follow their natural course. I have no sort of right to propose to Miss Murray, nor have I the remotest intention of ever doing so."

Leonard burst into uproarious laughter.

"So that was what you thought I wanted to tell you! You make me out a nice, modest sort of fellow, I must say! So generous of me to retire, rather than cut out a friend, who, of course, wouldn't have had the ghost of a chance against me if I had chosen to stand to my guns! I wonder whether it is possible to persuade you that seeing Miss Murray isn't of necessity loving her. Perhaps not; but I dare say you will believe me when I declare, upon my honour, that it never entered my head to make the extraordinary statement that you seemed to have expected. I did think of saying something to you about Miss Murray; but it amounted to no more than what I said the other day, and why weaken truth by repetition?"

"You don't convince me," Matthew remarked.

"Ask her herself then; she will remove all shadow of doubt from your mind."

"That is not what I mean. I mean that you haven't yet convinced me of error as to your own case."

"Oh well, put it as you please, then," returned Leonard with a touch of petulance. "Let us say, if you like,

that I am a little bit smitten with your fair friend, and that I think it just as well to lose no more time in turning my back upon her perpetually upturned nose. Even if it were so, there would be no occasion for heroics. I am not like you ; I am in a chronic state of being a little bit smitten with somebody, and I can't remember a single instance in which I haven't been cured at once by change of air. Moreover, I am not a marrying man, and don't mean to be until I meet the lovely and accomplished heiress for whom I am always on the lookout."

There was nothing more to be got out of 'him, nor could Matthew, who was in a hurry, prosecute investigations at much greater length. The two men parted with mutual expressions of friendship and goodwill ; but one of them felt sure that the other had not been entirely candid with him, for which he was sorry.

CHAPTER XV.

COMMON SENSE BREAKS DOWN.

It is proverbially perilous to play with fire ; yet pyrotechnic displays are the commonest of diversions, and are not supposed to endanger the lives of skilled operators. If only you keep cool and understand what you are about, your fireworks may dim the firmament without exposing you to any greater degree of risk than is inseparable from existence. So Matthew Austin, having a perfectly clear comprehension of what he was doing, and being in no fear—or scarcely any—of losing his self-control, had a pleasant time of it while the days grew longer and the pale sun stronger and winter began grudgingly to make way for spring.

There were moments when he was fain to laugh at himself—for never, surely, had a man been in love in such a queer, contented, hopeless fashion before, and it seemed clean against nature that he should enjoy the position—but he had very little time for introspection, nor did he often care to indulge in it. Wisely or foolishly, he had determined to make the most of what he felt sure would prove to have been the happiest days of his life, and by making the most of them he merely meant seeing as much as he could of Lilian Murray. To see her, to watch her, to hear her talk was enough—had to be enough, since it was out of the question for him to betray his love by word or look.

Now, it was not because he had undertaken an obviously impossible task that Matthew sometimes laughed at himself ; on the contrary, he considered it well within his powers to go on as he was doing without letting anybody guess his secret, and, as a matter of fact, Lady Sara remained in happy ignorance of it. As for that curious, crabbed specimen of humanity, Mr. Litton, his conjectures could not, of course, be the result of personal observation, so that Matthew was neither startled nor vexed when the old fellow said abruptly to him one day,—

"I suppose there is no use in my speaking, but I wish, for your sake, that those Murrays would leave the place. Mark my words: you will live to regret it if matters advance any further between you and the girl."

A friendship had sprung up between the recluse of Wilverton Grange and the young doctor, which had its origin chiefly in a common love of philosophic literature. The former, whose suspicious temperament had at first set him on his guard against admitting a fresh physician to his intimacy, had taken a great fancy to Matthew, after satisfying himself that the latter had no design for supplanting Dr. Jennings, while Matthew on his side liked Mr. Litton's library very much and its owner pretty well.

"Leonard has been talking nonsense to you," he replied tranquilly. "I have no regrets, and I am in no danger of earning any."

"Oh, so you say; you can't say anything else, I suppose. Go your own way then, and get yourself into trouble like the rest of the world. If women could but be clean abolished there would be no occasion to cheer people up by holding out hopes of a future state of bliss to them. Only then, to be sure, we should be even less willing to die than we are already."

Matthew wrote to Leonard Jerome to reproach him for his indiscretion, and received a prompt disclaimer in reply from the young man, who added,—

"You have no idea what a sharp old file that uncle of mine is. He knows all manner of things that he has not any business to know; though I will say for him that, in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred, he keeps his mouth closed. For the rest, you really mustn't expect your neighbours to be stone-blind, or dumb either. Give them something to talk about, my dear old man; it will be a charity to them and a relief to others besides yourself. For my own part, I can't see what on earth you are waiting for."

Not for encouragement, at all events, Lilian having given him as much of that as she could have done if he had been a fit and proper person to become her husband,

and if, to use Leonard's absurd phrase, she had "adored" him. But he was not misled by flattering and affectionate expressions which, he felt sure, would never have been uttered had not the speaker been wholly fancy-free; nor was he in the least afraid of breaking Miss Murray's heart. That allusion to the perspicacity of his neighbours did, however, cause him some passing disquietude; for it was true enough that in country towns people begin to chatter upon very slight provocation, and he had no business to give the Wilvertonians an excuse for coupling his name with that of his patient's daughter. Accordingly, he gave Prospect Place a wide berth until he was questioned and upbraided, when he resumed his interrupted visits. The truth was that he had never been accustomed to trouble himself about what might be said behind his back, and it was difficult for him to bear in mind always that young ladies cannot afford to be equally indifferent.

Thus the days and weeks slipped rapidly away until the hedgerows were green and the glory of the tulips and hyacinths in Matthew's garden was already a thing of the past. It was on a day mild and sunny enough to have done no discredit to the average month of June that our hero, unsuspecting of an impending crisis in his life, betook himself to Hayes Park in fulfilment of an engagement to lunch with his friends there and meet the Murrays. Owing to one cause and another he had seen little of Hayes Park and its denizens for some time past, while Anne had become almost a stranger to him. Of her brother he had heard nothing, or he would have made a point of placing himself in communication with her; but he was inclined to think that no news from that quarter might be regarded as good news, and if he had not tried to meet Miss Frere she had certainly made no effort to meet him. It was, therefore, an entirely superfluous proceeding on his part to enter into apologetic explanations as he shook hands with her, and so she hastened to assure him.

"You aren't expected to drive about the country

paying calls," said she. "Of course we all understand that your work takes up the whole of your time."

"Well, almost the whole," Matthew answered, guiltily conscious of many spare hours spent in Prospect Place. "I am not quite so busy as I was, though, otherwise I couldn't have given myself the pleasure of coming here to-day. People are beginning to leave, you see."

"Yes; isn't it too tiresome of them?" chimed in Mrs. Frere, who had caught his last words. "One sets the example and all the others become infected immediately—that is always the way; and nobody pities us poor things, who are left to vegetate in solitude for six months.—Although I must own I think you are right," she added, turning to Lady Sara, who was seated beside her; "a girl's first season ought always to be a long one, if possible."

"Oh, I don't know whether we shall be able to see the season out," Lady Sara answered; "that must depend upon circumstances. But this invitation from our cousins to stay with them until we could find a house for ourselves seemed like an opportunity which it would be a pity to lose. Personally, I shall be sorry to leave Wilverton; the waters and Mr. Austin—especially Mr. Austin—have done such wonders for me."

Mr. Austin at that moment looked very much as if his patient had returned the compliment by producing a wonderful effect upon him. Although he was well aware that Lady Sara Murray intended to spend the coming season in London; although he knew that the time of her departure could not be now far distant, and although he was conscious of the scrutiny of half a dozen pairs of eyes, he was unable to prevent the consternation with which he had been filled by this abrupt announcement from showing itself in his face. However, if he could not command his expression, he retained sufficient control over his voice to say cheerfully,—

"Are you about to desert us, then, Lady Sara?"

"Alas! we are. The letter only came yesterday, and I didn't see you to consult you before answering it. Besides, to tell you the truth, I am afraid I should have

had to disobey you even if you had ordered me to stay here a little longer. On Lilian's account I felt that it would be madness to refuse such an offer. It *does* make a difference, you see, to be launched from a good house, where there are constant entertainments going on."

"No doubt it does," Matthew agreed, "and you might have consulted me without any misgivings. The waters and I have done all that we can do for you. In fact, I believe you will be all the better for a change."

"Oh, everybody is the better for a change," said Mr. Frere; "we all want it now and then. Some of us can't get what we want, though, in this wicked world—can't even get our food until twenty minutes past the proper time."

He rang the bell noisily just as the butler threw the door open, and Mrs. Frere, taking Lady Sara by the arm, led her out. Lilian, as she passed Matthew, threw him a quick glance, the meaning of which he was at a loss to interpret. It had the appearance of being reproachful, and yet he did not see what he had done to merit reproach. He might perhaps have interrogated her, had he been placed next to her at the luncheon table, but such was not his privilege. Seated between Mrs. Frere and Maggie, he had enough to do to keep conversational step with his neighbours; and although he scarcely knew what either of them was talking about, it was necessary to make continual response to the younger, who had no notion of allowing her valuable remarks to fall upon inattentive ears. From the opposite side of the table Anne contributed an occasional observation; while Mr. Frere entertained Lady Sara with a prolonged jeremiad upon the decay of agriculture; and Dick, home for the Easter holidays, made precocious advances to Lilian, whose beauty had evidently produced a profound impression upon his youthful heart. What would have irritated Matthew, if he had been an irritable person, was the persistent reiteration with which Maggie addressed him by his *sobriquet* of "the medicine-man," and the comments thereupon which Mrs. Frere's kindness

induced her to make. "Physician, heal thyself!" he was thinking. "I have common sense enough to prescribe common-sense measures to other people, but I am too great an imbecile to smother my own folly, or even conceal it. Everybody must have seen how dismayed I was."

The worst of it was that this consciousness of having already made an exhibition of himself prevented him from recovering his natural manner. He knew that he was answering at cross-purposes, he knew that his laughter was palpably forced, he saw that Mrs. Frere was looking at him curiously and compassionately; so the only thing to be done seemed to be to get away as soon as possible.

Now, it was not likely that, on so fine an afternoon, Mrs. Frere would suffer her guests to depart without having shown them her daffodils; nor could one of them, when specially invited to accompany her to the lower garden for that purpose, find it in his heart to plead an engagement elsewhere. As soon as luncheon was over, therefore, Matthew was led out into the open air by his hostess, Mr. Frere following with Lady Sara, and Lilian, to whom the two young ones had attached themselves, bringing up the rear. Anne had disappeared. Perhaps she had come to the conclusion that nobody wanted her, and perhaps she had not been very far wrong in so concluding.

"Ah, well," Mrs. Frere said, with one of her placid, comfortable sighs, "one is sorry when nice people go away; still, it is often better, for some reasons, that they should go. And one soon forgets them."

"I dare say one does," answered Matthew.

"Eh? Oh yes, everybody soon forgets—especially you, with your work and all your other interests in life. As for me, I haven't much nowadays except the garden; but the garden suffices to drive my troubles away from my mind for several good hours out of every day, and then I always think it is such a mistake to go on mourning over things that can't be helped. If I could only persuade George to feel as I do, I am sure he wouldn't have the gout nearly as often as he does."

That was probably quite true; and if our philosophy

were not apt to serve us the shabby turn of deserting us just when it is most required, we should be a much more cheerful race than we are. The discomfited philosopher who was gazing at Mrs. Frere's daffodils with abstracted eyes could only acknowledge the justice of her remarks, and was not ungrateful to her for her well-meant attempt at consolation, though he was not disposed to pursue the subject further. Happily, Mrs. Frere had an endless store of other topics, equally interesting to her, to dilate upon; and so the inspection of outdoor and indoor plants went on, without any more embarrassing allusions, until Lady Sara's fly was seen approaching across the park.

"Can we give you a lift?" her ladyship asked, turning to Matthew, "or must you rush off somewhere now? If so, perhaps you could look in upon us later in the day."

Matthew hesitated. He was not obliged to rush off anywhere, and of course he would have to look in upon Lady Sara before long, but he did not quite relish the prospect of the suggested drive. He wanted to be alone for an hour and administer to himself the sharp castigation that he deserved.

"I was thinking of walking back," he began.

"Oh, then, let me walk with you," interrupted Lilian eagerly; "there is plenty of time, and I do so hate driving in a shut fly!"

It was the first time that she had spoken to him directly that day. Her eyes expressed a command rather than an entreaty, which was half painful, half pleasurable to him. "She, at any rate, doesn't suspect," he thought. With smiling alacrity he said what nobody could have helped saying in answer to such a speech, and Lady Sara's consent was readily given. Evidently Mr. Austin was regarded in the light of one of those safe, elderly gentlemen whose society calls for no chaperonage.

A gallant but indiscreet offer on Dick's part to accompany the pair was declined by Lilian with such uncompromising bluntness that the boy fell back in manifest and crestfallen indignation, upon which, no doubt, he was subsequently chaffed without mercy by his younger

sister ; and so it presently came to pass that Matthew and the girl whom he loved were pacing side by side across the grass, with nobody to overhear or interrupt them.

"Isn't it horrid?" Lilian burst out suddenly.

"I don't know," answered Matthew. "A good many things are horrid, but not the weather or the landscape or the present moment—at least, not to me."

"You understand quite well what I mean—our going off to London like this. I thought we should have been here for another month or six weeks, and so did mamma until these people sent us their tiresome, officious invitation."

"You are really sorry to leave these parts, then?"

"Does that strike you as so very wonderful? Do you think I am going to enjoy myself, or that I shall make any new friends like those whom I am leaving behind me? But as *you* don't care, you are naturally surprised that I should."

"I never said that I didn't care."

"No; you only show plainly by your manner that you don't."

Matthew, who was under the impression that his manner had given unmistakable evidence to the contrary, was very nearly rejoining, "I am glad you think so." But that would have been inexcusable; so he kept silence for a few seconds, in order to make sure that he had himself well in hand; after which he remarked in a cheerful friendly tone of voice,—

"I assure you that your departure will be a very great loss to me; I shall miss you and Lady Sara long after you have both ceased to think about your country doctor. But it was in the nature of things that you should return to your own world, while I remained in mine. Besides, whatever you may think, you are really going to enjoy yourself and make plenty of fresh friends. Those whom you leave behind you are well aware of that; and they would be selfish sort of friends if they wished to retard you from fulfilling your destiny."

Lilian vouchsafed no reply to these eminently sensible

and fitting observations. They had reached a small copse, through the pale green branches of which the sun's rays fell aslant upon a carpet of spring wildflowers, and at every other step she bent down to gather primroses and bluebells.

"Do you know," she asked abruptly at length, "what those children were talking about to me after luncheon?"

"They were very amusing, I have no doubt."

"They were so amusing that I longed to knock their heads together. I always knew that you had a great admiration for that cold, immaculate Miss Frere, but never—no, never!—should I have believed that you were actually thinking of marrying her. How you will regret it when it is too late!"

"Indeed I shall do no such thing, and for excellent reasons. You are altogether wrong. I don't call Miss Frere cold. I doubt whether she is more immaculate than other people, and most certainly I am not thinking of marrying her."

"Well, *they* think you will, anyhow. They are quite eager for the match; they are sure their sister will be graciously pleased to accept you; they have arranged everything——"

"Oh, what does it matter what a couple of children have arranged?" interrupted Matthew impatiently. "It is all nonsense from beginning to end."

Lilian raised her eyes to his with a doubting glance.

"I think it is true," she said. "Why do you look so guilty? Yes, I know it is true!"

Even then he might have held out, if the eyes which were anxiously interrogating his own had not been liquid, beyond all doubt or question, with gathering tears; but that sight was more than he could stand—perhaps it was more than any man could have stood. Away went wisdom, prudence, and conscientiousness; he had clasped her hand before he well knew what he was about, and was exclaiming,—

"Oh no, you don't; you know what the real truth is; you know that I shall never marry any one, since

it is utterly, ridiculously impossible that I should ever marry you ! ”

Whether, during the next five minutes or so, Lilian convinced him that no sort of impossibility was involved in the matter is uncertain—shortly afterwards Matthew was of opinion that she had not so convinced him—but that she really and truly loved him he could not do otherwise than believe, and such a discovery was enough to drive all other thoughts from his mind for the time being. There are a few, always brief, moments in life when we find out what happiness means, and it would be a thousand pities to shorten them, even if we could, by reflections which are quite sure to present themselves with all necessary rapidity. Perhaps rather more than five minutes had elapsed before Matthew descended from the seventh heaven to the surface of the prosaic planet which we inhabit, and said decisively,—

“At all events, I must not dream of binding you. Your mother will have every right to accuse me of dishonourable conduct, as it is.”

“Will she ? ” asked the girl, who was clinging to his arm and looking up into his face with mingled triumph and humility. “I don’t think she will after I have told her that it was really I who proposed to you, and that you would have refused me if you had had the strength of mind. Of course I ought to be ashamed of myself ; but I am not very much ashamed. And you *must* bind me, please, because I mean to bind you. I couldn’t go away in peace unless you were publicly and formally bound.”

“Surely you are not afraid that I shall jilt you ! ” said Matthew, laughing.

“I don’t know. I was really afraid of Miss Frere—though I see you don’t believe me—and I am not sure that I am not a little afraid of her still. She is so very superior to me, you see ! ”

“Ah, my dear, that isn’t the question. One doesn’t fall in love with superiority, though one may easily fall in love with one’s superiors. I am a shocking example of a man who has fallen in love with his social superior——”

Lilian stopped him by laying her finger upon his lips.

"I can't bear to hear you talk like that!" she exclaimed. "In the first place, it isn't true; and in the second place, social distinctions have nothing to say to you and me; we have got beyond them. You are a thousand times too good for me—you know you are!"

"I can't imagine why you should think so."

"Anybody will tell you why; lots of people will tell you as soon as our engagement is announced."

And it was in vain that Matthew protested against engagements and announcements. It was pointed out to him, with some show of reason, that an engagement which is not announced is practically no engagement at all; and that, since he chose to speak of dishonourable conduct, nothing can well be more dishonourable than an avowal of love, followed up by a refusal to face the legitimate consequences of such an avowal. Finally, he could only say that Lady Sara's wishes in the matter must be paramount.

"It is almost certain that she will forbid an engagement. I should if I were in her place. But whatever may happen, I shall not change; you may be sure of that."

"You think I shall change then?"

"I think it is absolutely essential that you should make sure," Matthew answered gravely. "You cannot be sure yet; you have seen nothing. All manner of things and people are waiting for you, and you will have to look at them."

"Oh, I shall have to go through this one season, I know; there is no help for that. Only I want everybody to understand that I am not free."

Matthew smiled. There was no occasion to argue further against a stipulation which he knew in advance would be deemed—and rightly deemed—inadmissible. He had pleasanter subjects than that to discourse upon during the remainder of the walk to Wilverton, at the end of which, as he could not but foresee, a very unpleasant quarter of an hour was in store for him.

CHAPTER XVI.

LADY SARA'S SENTENCE.

"ARE you going to have it out with mamma at once?" Lilian asked, when she and her affianced lover were standing on the doorstep in Prospect Place.

"Oh yes," Matthew answered with a rather rueful smile; "I think she ought to be told at once. You must be prepared for a scolding."

"I don't feel much alarmed."

"Don't you? Well, I must confess that I do. In fact, I am not sure that I have ever before in my life felt as thoroughly frightened as I do at this moment."

The girl laughed as she preceded him up the narrow staircase.

"How funny you are!" she exclaimed. "Why, what can poor mamma do to you? Besides, she is almost as fond of you as I am—only in a different way, of course."

"Ah! that doesn't make things any easier!" sighed Matthew.

But Lilian either did not hear or did not heed his ejaculation. She had opened the drawing-room door, had peeped through the aperture, and now drew back.

"Go and have your tooth out while I take off my hat and jacket," she whispered; "I will be with you again in time to apply cold water and burnt feathers, in case you faint." And so, with an encouraging pat on the shoulder and a gentle push, she dismissed him to make the best he could of a bad business.

He was very conscious indeed of its being a bad business as he advanced across the room towards the invalid chair in which the unsuspecting Lady Sara reclined.

"So here you are at last!" said she cheerfully; "what a time you have been! Do you find it too hot with the windows shut? I can't bring myself to give up fires yet."

"I am hot; but it is with shame, not with the fire," Matthew answered. "Lady Sara, I have something to

tell you which you will dislike extremely, and which, I am afraid, will make you angry as well."

The faded, emaciated woman in the *chaise-longue* started forward, clasping her fingers with a nervous, apprehensive movement. In the course of her life she had had to be told of a great many things which she had disliked extremely, although it cannot be said that anger was the emotion to which she had been most frequently moved by the hearing of them.

"What is it?" she asked quickly. "Have you heard something about my sister, or—or any of the others?"

"No; the trouble is nearer home than that. It is better to speak out than to keep you in suspense, I think. Lady Sara, while I was walking back with your daughter this afternoon, I told her that I loved her, and she—well, I must not say that she accepted me, because she could not do that without your consent, but she wishes to accept me. Now you know the worst!"

He paused, thinking that the right of reply belonged to the opposition; but for several seconds none was forthcoming. Lady Sara had drawn a long breath and had fallen back upon her cushions.

"*You!*" she ejaculated at length, in accents of the most profound amazement.

"Oh, I know what a shock it must be to you! You have been deceived in me; I have abused a position of trust; I won't attempt to excuse myself. All I can say is that nothing was further from my intentions this morning than to act as I have done—and there is very little use in saying that now. Of course you cannot sanction an engagement."

There was another protracted pause, at the end of which Lady Sara said,—

"Mr. Austin, do you yourself think that I ought to sanction it?"

"No, I don't," answered Matthew unhesitatingly; "I should not sanction it if I were in your place, though my grounds for refusal might not be the same as yours. Personally, I can't see the great importance of conven-

tional degrees in rank ; still, it must be admitted that so long as they exist they are not entirely meaningless ; and I have tried always to remember, in associating with you, as I have done——”

“ Oh, it isn't that ! ” Lady Sara interrupted ; “ I wouldn't for the world have you think that it was that ! Of course your blood is quite as good as most people's, and a great deal better than that of a host of nobodies who are received everywhere because they are rich ; but—but——”

“ But, in any case, you couldn't allow your daughter to take such a leap in the dark ; you wouldn't be doing your duty to her unless you gave her at least the chance of making some more suitable choice. Isn't that what you mean ? ”

Lady Sara supposed that was what she meant. A position so unassailable was, at all events, quite the best to take up under the circumstances, and she was glad to be spared the painful task of dwelling upon subsidiary drawbacks. She listened tolerantly while Matthew entered upon a more ample avowal ; she had no reproaches to address to him ; she was not, to tell the truth, greatly surprised at his having lost his heart to her beautiful daughter, although the risk of his doing so had not happened to come within the range of her prevision. What astonished her beyond measure was that Lilian should have become enamoured of a man who, notwithstanding all his admirable qualities and the claims which he had established upon her gratitude, looked and behaved so very little like the subject of a romantic passion.

“ I can't account for it,” she said, with touching candour ; “ it does seem so unnatural and improbable ! But perhaps she may have been carried away by her feelings, poor child, and by the admiration which, I am sure, you well deserve. She is impulsive at times, as all my family are. Unluckily,” added Lady Sara, sighing retrospectively, “ our impulses are apt to be soon driven out of sight and mind by fresh ones.”

Matthew could only assure her in reply that he had no desire to take advantage of Lilian's impulsiveness.

"I wish her to go away absolutely unfettered," he declared. "It stands to reason that that must be your wish also, and I think you have shown very great kindness and forbearance in blaming me as little as you have done."

"Oh, I don't blame you at all," Lady Sara answered simply; "most likely it wasn't in the least your fault. I can truly say that there is nobody in the world whom I would rather have had for a son-in-law, if only you had been richer and—and a little more in society. There are reasons which make it necessary for me to consider such things, and I certainly think, as you do, that Lilian ought to be left absolutely unfettered for the present."

"But *I* don't think so," said Lilian herself, who had slipped noiselessly into the room during her mother's speech, and who now sank down upon a footstool beside the invalid chair. "You are very good and wise people, both of you," she continued; "only you don't happen to know me quite as well as I know myself. You might give me credit for knowing what I want, all the same."

"O my dear," Lady Sara returned, stroking her daughter's copper-coloured hair, from which the flickering firelight drew gleams of gold, "nobody doubts your knowing what you want *now*; the question is what you will want six months hence. There are so many things that one begins to feel the want of after one has seen other people in possession of them!"

The discussion went on in a curiously dispassionate style, Lady Sara and Matthew being the chief speakers, and being as completely in accord as they were obviously in the right. At length Lilian started suddenly to her feet, and catching her submissive wooer by the coat sleeve, said,—

"Come into the dining-room; I want to speak to you alone for a minute."

Matthew obeyed, after casting an interrogative glance at Lady Sara, who made a sign of assent; and as soon as a passage and two solid partition walls had been placed between her and her mother, Lilian began,—

"Matthew—oh, I wish your name wasn't Matthew; it sounds so ancient and righteous! Well, I must make the best of it, and I think I will call you Mat in future. Mat, then, do you love me?"

"Is there any need for you to ask that question?" he returned.

"Most people would say there was, after the way in which you have been talking; but never mind!—I believe you do. Now, as you love me, as you are a gentleman, as there isn't a word to be said against you, and as you are well enough off to marry—I suppose you are well enough off to marry?"

"Oh, I suppose so."

"Then there is no reason why our engagement should not be announced, except that you and mamma think I may meet somebody in London whom I shall like better."

"But we cannot announce what does not exist."

"The engagement *does* exist; I have your promise, and you have mine. Only you wish for secrecy, while I wish for publicity. Mind, I am not asking for anything formal; all I want you to do is just to mention it, as I shall, to a few intimate friends—to Mr. Jerome, for instance, when you write to him, and to the Freres and one or two others."

Matthew smiled and shook his head.

"It would be better not," he said. "Moreover, you must see that I couldn't possibly do such a thing without your mother's consent."

"She will consent; and even if she didn't—but she will."

"If she does, of course I will willingly do as you wish. But I can't quite understand why you are so bent upon it."

"You will understand still less after I have told you, I'm afraid. Or rather you will misunderstand—which is worse. My reason is that I want to have something real and definite to take away with me. When I can't see you or talk to you any more, when everything and everybody about me will be so different, I may—I don't think it is likely, but I *may* come to feel as if all this

had been a dream, as if it had happened to some girl whom I once knew, not to me myself. Do you ever have that feeling?"

"I think I have had something of the kind," Matthew answered, keeping his countenance from falling by an effort; "but your reason isn't a convincing one. It is the very reason that I should have given for leaving you free."

"Didn't I tell you that you would misunderstand? Clever and wise as you are, Mat, there are things which seem to be beyond you, and I am much too stupid to explain them. However, it doesn't matter, now that you have agreed to do as I ask you, so long as mamma doesn't object. Come and hear me conquer all her objections."

Not a little to Matthew's surprise, this task was accomplished almost without difficulty. During her daughter's brief absence Lady Sara had reflected, and had arrived at two conclusions: firstly, that the girl's fancy for Mr. Austin was pretty sure to be short-lived; and secondly, that it would be a great mistake to stimulate that fancy by needless opposition. Therefore, after some slight show of reluctance, for form's sake, she said,—

"Very well, dear; let it be so. We have nothing to conceal, and perhaps no great harm will be done by our friends hearing the truth. The truth, of course, is that there is no actual engagement."

But Lilian demurred to this way of putting things.

"The engagement is as actual as anything can be," she declared; "only we are not proclaiming it yet, because you hope or think that it may be broken off before next August. If it hasn't been broken off by then——"

"Ah, well, it will be time enough to think about what is to happen next August when August comes," interrupted Lady Sara. Then she turned to Matthew and said, "I hope you don't think me a very worldly and ungrateful old woman; I can but do my best according to my lights."

"I think you have been kindness and generosity itself," he replied emphatically.

And indeed, during the next few days, she showed herself in many respects worthy of his eulogy. Those were happy days for Matthew, in spite of the parting which was imminent; he was allowed to spend nearly the whole time that he could spare out of them with his betrothed; and Lady Sara, who came to tea with him on the last afternoon, spoke as though she anticipated revisiting his house at no very distant date. It was a delightful and spacious house, she remarked; no pleasanter home could be desired by persons of unambitious tastes.

The fact is that she was not ungrateful nor was she more worldly than education and experience had forced her to be. For her own part, she could have been happy enough as the wife of a well-to-do country practitioner—always supposing that country practitioner to be so superior a specimen of the genus as Matthew Austin—but she had her doubts about Lilian, in whom she had long ago detected the existence of certain family characteristics, and she had an exaggerated appreciation of the advantages that belong to wealth. Upon the whole, her attitude towards her would-be son-in-law was rather one of benevolent neutrality than of obstructiveness. The course of events must settle his fate, she thought.

So when he helped her into the railway carriage which was to bear her and her daughter away to the scene of the latter's prescribed ordeal, her leave-taking was almost affectionate. There were to be letters, constant letters, and in case of illness he would be summoned instantly. "Because there is nobody in London or anywhere else like you!"

As for Lilian, she had bidden farewell to her lover in a less public spot than a railway station. All she had to say to him now was,—

"Remember the Freres are to be told, and other people are not to be contradicted if they ask questions. Oh, and by the way," she added, as an afterthought, "don't forget to write to your friend Mr. Jerome. I think he foresaw what was coming, and he is sure to be pleased."

CHAPTER XVII.

THE DRAWBACKS OF PHILANTHROPY.

THE feeling of which Lilian Murray had spoken with some apprehension was experienced to the full by Matthew after she had left Wilverton, and he had fallen back into the ordinary routine of his daily life. The events of the preceding week hardly seemed real to him; he had difficulty in believing that he was in sober earnest engaged to be married to the girl whom he had for so long been satisfied, or almost satisfied, to love without hope of return or reward. The engagement, to be sure, was but provisional and contingent; he frequently had to remind himself of that, lest he should lapse from scepticism into over-credulity; still, the fact remained that one of the contracting parties did not so regard it, and he was clearly bound to respect her wishes in the matter of making the same known to a few sympathetic persons.

Accordingly, he wrote to Leonard Jerome, upon whose sympathy, to tell the truth, he did not count with implicit confidence; and he was agreeably surprised to receive by return of post a very hearty letter of congratulation from his young friend. Leonard was in London, and thought it likely that he would remain there, off and on, for some months to come. He was once more, to use his own expression, "as fit as a fiddle;" he was participating in the many forms of diversion which a community devoted rather to the development of physical than of mental perfection provides for its gilded youth; and he humbly trusted that his uncle would not be seized with any burning desire to see him again yet awhile.

"Though I should like well enough to see *you* and have a chat," he added considerably. "But you are

sure to be coming up to town by-and-by, now that you have such a powerful magnet to attract you. Possibly I may come across Lady Sara and her fair daughter somewhere or other, and if I do I shall not fail to tell them that in my opinion they are uncommonly lucky people. Don't you be afraid of being cut out. It is all right and highly magnanimous on your part to stand aside until the end of the season ; but unless I am much mistaken in Miss Murray she knows her own mind as well as anybody. Besides, there aren't such an awful lot of real good fellows about ; and to the best of my belief there is only one Matthew Austin."

Well, that was satisfactory. It was to be hoped that the other friends whom Matthew had been specially instructed to inform of his engagement would take the news in a similar spirit of cordiality. For reasons to which he was unable to give any definite name, Matthew felt extremely reluctant to make confession to the Frere family ; but there was no need for him to trouble himself about the matter, because they had heard the whole story some days before he drove out to Hayes Park with the intention of enlightening them. By what means is news, true and false, promulgated with such amazing rapidity ? Nobody seems to know whence the Mrs. Jennings derive their information ; but there is no city, town, or village so ill provided for as to lack a Mrs. Jennings, and the Mrs. Jennings of Wilverton was in a position to state precisely what were the conditions under which the young doctor had been permitted to style himself Miss Murray's *fiancé*. Mrs. Frere, therefore, was quite ready with ungrudging felicitations, supplemented by warnings which only she knew how to offer without a shade of offensiveness.

"I shall rejoice for your sake if it does come off," she said frankly, "because I think the girl is nice, and she is so marvellously pretty that one would have to forgive her even if she wasn't nice. But considering how young she is, and how queer some of her mother's people have been, I am sure you are quite right to leave

the question open for the present. It will be so much more comfortable for you, in case of any hitch occurring, to be able to say that you anticipated it. And, if I were you, I *would* anticipate it. I always anticipate evil myself, and it is wonderful how seldom I am disappointed. Those new tea-roses, for instance : it was rather disgusting that every single one of them should die ; but I had the comfort of knowing that I had never from the first expected them to thrive in that soil."

Anne, who had been equally friendly, though less outspoken, in her reception of Matthew's tidings, interrupted these premature efforts at consolation.

"Do allow Mr. Austin credit for knowing better than to plant his roses where they can't be expected to thrive," said she, laughing. "I don't believe he anticipates any hitch at all, and I am sure there is no reason why his friends should."

Anne was so pleasant and cheerful and spoke with so much kindness about Lilian that Matthew felt sincerely grateful to her ; although, upon reflection, he scarcely knew what cause he had for particular gratitude. No doubt those silly children had said some silly things to her, but it was not to be supposed that she could feel even remotely aggrieved by the downfall of their castle in the air.

Nevertheless, her manner in talking to him had undergone a certain change, of which he became more sensible as time went on. Being now much less busy than he had been during the winter, he was able to see his friends with greater frequency, and to the Frere family he was always a welcome visitor. Consequently, he found himself pretty often at Hayes Park ; and so it was that Anne, who no longer avoided his society, began to show herself to him under a new aspect. Her capricious moods, her alternations between shyness and expansiveness, were things of the past ; she always seemed pleased to see him, and never forgot to inquire what news he had from London ; but he had ceased to be her confidant. She made him aware of that in various ways,

and he could not help suspecting that he had fallen a little in her esteem. Possibly she may have thought it rather silly of him to fix his affections upon a girl so much younger than himself, and so unlikely to develop into the contented wife of a rural practitioner. Of Spencer she showed a marked reluctance to speak. In answer to his questions she said that she occasionally heard from her brother, and hoped all was going on well; but the obligation under which she had been laid by Matthew's intervention was so evidently burdensome to her that he felt a delicacy about alluding to the subject.

One morning, however, the subject was brought to his notice in a manner which, if it did not necessitate immediate communication with Anne, appeared to render prompt action on his part imperative. Sir Godfrey, whose letter was dated from the House of Commons, and was couched in terms of injured remonstrance, wrote to say that he had just been made the recipient of exceedingly unpleasant information by Colonel Egerton.

"As far as I can make out, your *protégé* has been appropriating money belonging to the sergeants' mess. At any rate, a matter of fifty pounds is said to be missing, the man is under arrest, and Colonel Egerton seems to think he is doing me a favour by saying that the worst consequences may yet be averted if the deficit is made good within the next thirty-six hours. What leads him to suppose that I shall pay up a considerable sum for the benefit of a rascal whom I never saw in my life, but whom I have good-naturedly gone out of my way to befriend, I am at a loss to imagine. Certainly I shall do no such thing, and I much regret that your representations induced me to exert myself on behalf of so undeserving a person. I think it right to tell you of what has occurred; but if you move in the matter—beyond, perhaps, informing the man's relations—you will, in my opinion, be extremely ill-advised. I ought, perhaps, to mention that the 22nd Lancers are at present quartered at Lowcester; but of that you are probably already aware."

Matthew sighed and unlocked his money-box to see whether he had as much as fifty pounds in hand. Fortunately or unfortunately that amount was forthcoming, and his next act was to study Bradshaw, with the result that he discovered a train, starting in about two hours' time, which would land him at Lowcester before night-fall. He had not the slightest doubt or hesitation as to the course which it behoved him to pursue. Ill-advised it might be, in the abstract, to fly to the aid of a hopeless young ne'er-do-well, who was probably a thief into the bargain, but it was altogether out of the question that Miss Frere's brother should be committed for trial, and perhaps sentenced to penal servitude.

"All the same," reflected Matthew ruefully, "I am afraid the fellow has ruined himself. It is all very fine to make restitution, but I don't see how they are going to get over the fact of the arrest or how he can possibly be recommended for a commission after such an episode. Dear me, what a perverse world it is, and how uncalled-for half the catastrophes that take place in it seem to be! It would have been so easy, one would have thought, to steer clear of criminal offences for one year! But the whole question, I suppose, is one of temptation and adequate power of resistance."

That, no doubt, is the whole question, and a deeply discouraging one it is to ruminate upon. To give his thoughts a pleasanter turn, Matthew reverted to a long letter from Lilian which he had perused before opening his brother's, and which seemed to show that her powers of resistance so far were all that could be desired. She had passed through the formidable ceremony of presentation, she had been to half a dozen balls, and was going to at least half a dozen more, engagements of every kind were multiplying, "and I loathe it all," she declared. "It is quite as bad as I thought it would be—worse, in some ways—and my only wish is to get to the end of it. Can you look three months ahead? *I* can't, though I am always trying. I feel like Eurydice in the lower regions, and I know the last thing you would

ever think of doing would be to come and play Orpheus to me. However, I shall emerge of my own accord when the time comes ; you need have no fears on that score."

It was in this strain that she habitually wrote, and many lovers would have detected an undertone of uneasiness in it. Why protest so much? Why anathematize what, after all, must needs be novel and exciting to every young girl? Lilian would have been more convincing if she had been less vehement. But Matthew was too loyal to seek for symptoms of disloyalty. Moreover, he said to himself that this preliminary petulance would soon give way to a more reasonable frame of mind. He did not want Lilian to be disgusted with the fashionable world, though, of course, he could not wish her to become enamoured of it.

Meanwhile, he had to pack up some clothes and make a few arrangements, because it was certain that he could not count upon being back before the following afternoon. There was nothing, he found, to prevent him from absenting himself for four-and-twenty hours ; and, having told the servants that he had been unexpectedly called away—an incident which was not so uncommon as to give rise to conjecture—he set forth on his tedious cross-country railway journey.

Lowcester, a decorous, somnolent cathedral city, upon the outskirts of which the cavalry barracks were situated, boasted, as he was informed by a friendly porter, of two very excellent hotels. The porter was unwilling to draw invidious distinctions, but went so far as to say that he believed the "Rose and Crown" to be rather more extensively patronized by the nobility and gentry than the "Golden Lion." Matthew, therefore, had himself and his modest belongings conveyed to the "Rose and Crown," where he was shown into a vast, mouldy-smelling bedroom, and was told that, by giving due notice, he could have anything he liked for dinner. He replied that, under those circumstances, he would have anything that the cook liked to give him ; after which he

requested to be furnished with Colonel Egerton's address. Rather to his surprise, the landlord denied all knowledge of such a person, remarking, with an air of lofty superiority, that he had never had any personal dealings with "the military." It is necessary to visit a country town dominated by clerical influence in order to arrive at any idea of the low esteem in which her Majesty's forces are held by a section of her Majesty's subjects. However, some less haughty and exclusive individual—possibly the hostler—was discovered about the premises, from whom it was ascertained that Colonel Egerton and his family resided at The White Lodge, a quarter of a mile or so away.

"Bother his family!" thought Matthew, as, in pursuance of instructions, he walked along the grass-grown High Street towards the suburb where Colonel Egerton had taken up his temporary abode; "I never thought of his being a married man, and I would a little rather not have this surreptitious visit of mine talked about by inquisitive ladies. I suppose he will grant me a private audience, though, if I say I have come upon business?"

There was the less difficulty about that because Colonel Egerton's wife and daughters happened to be smart personages who had gone up to London for the season, leaving the head of the family to shift for himself at the post of duty during their absence. The colonel, a dapper little good-humoured man, with a waxed, grey moustache, stepped out into the hall, after Matthew's card had been carried to him, and shook his visitor cordially by the hand.

"Very glad to see you," said he; "I know what has brought you here; I've heard of the kind interest that you have taken in that confounded young jackanapes."

He drew Matthew into the spacious, comfortably-furnished smoking-room which he was inhabiting during his period of enforced bachelorhood, pushed a box of cigars across the table, lighted one himself, sank into an easy chair, and began,—

"Well, now, I had better tell you at once, Mr. Austin, that the money will have to be paid. I'm ready to do what I can, but unless the money is forthcoming I shall be powerless."

"Oh, I have brought the money," said Matthew.

"You have, eh? Has his father been told then?"

"Well, no. For many reasons, it would not have been advisable to tell his father."

"Then who—but that's none of my business you'll say. H'm!—well, if the amount missing is made good in time, nothing more need be said about it, and I can simply try the fellow on a charge of drunkenness and insubordination, for which he has been placed under arrest. Bad enough, of course, but a flea-bite compared with the other."

"Drunkenness and insubordination!" echoed Matthew in dismay.

"O Lord, yes! Your friend has been distinguishing himself, I can tell you. Wanted to be dismissed from the service, I dare say, and couldn't think of any better means than that of effecting his object. Always the way with these beggars!—sooner or later they're bound to get desperate and play Old Harry!"

"But I should have thought that he had the best of reasons for being anything but desperate just now."

"Ah, I'm not so sure of that. If you or I had misappropriated money, and didn't see our way to replace it, we should be rather near desperation, I suppose. Mind, I know nothing of this officially; I only learnt by a side-wind what was bound to come out at the court-martial, and that was why I wired to Sir Godfrey. Therefore, anything that I may tell you about young Frere—for I presume you haven't heard his story and would like to hear it?—must be regarded as strictly confidential, please."

"I quite understand that," answered Matthew, "and I should certainly like to hear what has happened. I may say that I have no personal acquaintance with the culprit, although I know his people very well."

Colonel Egerton glanced at the disinterested friend of the family with a half-humorous, half-compassionate twinkle in his eye. No doubt he was thinking to himself, "Either this man is a misguided philanthropist, or else he is in love with one of Frere's sisters." So clever does a middle-aged man of the world and experienced commander of a regiment become. But if Mr. Austin liked to expend fifty pounds in rescuing a malefactor from the clutches of justice, that, after all, was Mr. Austin's affair; so the colonel cleared his voice and embarked upon his succinct narrative without irrelevant comments.

"I need hardly tell you that there's a woman in the business; I never knew a bad job yet but a woman was connected with it in some way or other, and Frere has been getting into scrapes of that kind ever since he did my regiment the honour to enlist in it. There is no occasion to trouble you with bygone histories, but I dare say you can guess the sort of troubles that are apt to arise when you have a good-looking, swaggering young sergeant, whom everybody knows to be a gentleman, and who, I suspect, is a little bit given to romancing about his rank and prospects and so forth. The cause of the present calamity is a certain Mrs. Johnson or Jackson or Thompson—hanged if I remember the woman's name!—a vulgar little over-dressed, yellow-haired widow, whom several of our young fellows have been running after. She is said to be well off—whether truly or untruly I'm sure I can't say. She has chosen to take up Frere and make much of him; which, as you may imagine, has brought about a good deal of unpleasantness. There is some story about a jewelled bangle that he gave her, and about her wearing it ostentatiously at a race-meeting here the other day. Naturally, he couldn't have paid for it, and from what I hear I fancy she must have run him into debt also for flowers and bonbons and other rubbish. The upshot of it all, I have no doubt, was that, being hardly pressed and having unfortunately access to money which didn't belong to him, he went to the races and failed to back winners.

Anyhow, it was after the races that he was found reeling about the streets, and he wasn't got back to barracks without a scuffle, confound him! Now, have I made the situation clear to you?"

"As clear as is necessary, I think," answered Matthew with a mournful grimace. "I suppose he may say good-bye to his chance of a commission after this?"

The colonel jerked up his shoulders.

"What can we do?" he asked. "He has no defence, and discipline must be maintained. I tell you frankly that if I were his father I should purchase his discharge; I don't believe he will ever do any good at soldiering now. One is sorry, of course, but one has done one's best. You would like to see him, I suppose?"

"Yes, I had better see him, if I may," answered Matthew without much alacrity. "Where is he?—in solitary confinement?"

"No, he's in hospital at present—either sick or malingering. I'll tell you what, Mr. Austin; if you'll do me the favour to dine with me at our mess to-night—I can't ask you to dine here, because my wife is away, and a kitchen-maid is considered good enough for the likes of me in her absence—I'll introduce you to Bowker, our medico, who will arrange for you to have a talk with the man either to-night or to-morrow morning."

Matthew thanked the hospitable colonel, but begged to be excused. He was anxious, he said, to conceal the fact of his visit to Lowcester if possible, and the fewer people who were made aware of it the better he would be pleased.

"All right," answered Colonel Egerton, nodding good-naturedly; "I understand. I'll say a word to Bowker, then, and he'll look you up the first thing in the morning. Very good fellow, Bowker, and no chatterbox. Now, Mr. Austin, I don't want to meddle with what doesn't concern me, but there is just one thing that I should like to say. Somebody, of course, has been and is helping Frere out with money, and I gather from what you tell me that it isn't his father. Well, I should

strongly advise that person to cut off the supplies. He is one of those happy-go-lucky fellows who will take all he can get and never stop to say thank you. Sooner or later the cost of supporting him must needs fall upon his father, and there's nothing to be gained by mystery and postponement. If he were my son I should make him a small annual allowance, upon the condition that he sailed at once for Australia and stayed there. He'll never keep out of trouble in this country, you may depend upon it."

"Thank you," answered Matthew; "you are probably right, and I will think over what you have said. All hope of a commission must be abandoned, I presume?"

"Oh, I don't say that he might not eventually get his commission if he were to turn over a new leaf; but it stands to reason that he would have to wait a longish time for it, and I confess that I shouldn't feel at all sanguine on his behalf."

There was nothing more to be said, and Matthew went away with a strong impression upon his mind that he was about to make a very unprofitable, though unavoidable, investment.

CHAPTER XVIII.

AN IMPENITENT SINNER.

MATTHEW had not finished his breakfast on the following morning when his military colleague called in obedience to instructions, to conduct him to the hospital. There was very little to be got out of this tall, spare, saturnine personage, who appeared to merit the character given him by his colonel for being no chatterbox.

"Nothing of consequence," he said, in reply to Matthew's inquiries. "Effects of drink and a shock, that's all. Usual thing—nervous system all to pieces."

"But I understand that he doesn't drink habitually," Matthew said.

The taciturn Bowker made no answer until the remark had been repeated, when he observed,—

"Well, you can look at him and form your own opinion. As a matter of fact, he is fit to go back to the cells; but I have kept him on the sick-list because——"

He shrugged his shoulders slightly by way of completing the sentence.

On the road to the hospital Matthew thought it best to say a word or two upon a subject as to which his companion manifested no impertinent curiosity.

"I suppose you are acquainted with the circumstances?" he began.

"Yes, I have heard something, and the colonel spoke to me last night. Glad to hear you have brought the money. I was to tell you that if you would hand it over to me, it should be placed where it ought to be. You can't very well give it to the man himself, you see."

"I suppose not," Matthew agreed. "Here are ten five-pound notes, then, if you'll kindly take charge of

them. May I ask what punishment is likely to be inflicted upon him for the minor offence?"

"Oh, they'll have to reduce him to the ranks, I should say. Lucky fellow to get off so cheap!"

"Yes—only that means something very like ruin in his case, I am afraid."

"Well, I take it that he was practically ruined some time ago. Bound to go to the deuce sooner or later; men of that stamp invariably do. Can't afford to knock themselves about like the average Tommy—haven't the stamina."

After a long pause, Matthew asked,—

"Is he liked in the regiment?"

"I believe the men rather like him; he is a fine horseman, and he knows how to use his fists. But he has made himself obnoxious to the officers in more ways than one. Pleasant fellow, too, in some respects; glad he is to escape the worst consequences of his tomfoolery."

Tomfoolery seemed a lenient term to apply to the misdeeds of which Spencer Frere had presumably been guilty; yet when Matthew was brought face to face with the culprit, he almost believed it to be appropriate. For this long-legged, fair-complexioned fellow, in hospital clothes, who was found sitting on a sunny bench, with his back turned to the great bare building, really did not look much like a hardened sinner. His manner, it is true, was defiant, not to say offensive; but that, Matthew thought, was only natural under the circumstances. Courage, the one good quality which sometimes survives self-respect, is apt to manifest itself after offensive fashions when left to stand alone.

"So you are Anne's friend, the doctor," said he, after the other doctor had discreetly withdrawn out of ear-shot. "Very good of you to take all this trouble, I'm sure; but one must presume that you have your reasons. And you have brought the missing money with you, old Bowker tells me."

"Yes; it will be all right as far as the money is

concerned," Matthew answered, seating himself beside the subject of his benevolence, and endeavouring by a sidelong scrutiny to take his measure.

"Ah!—well, I didn't ask for it, you know, but I won't deny that I feel a little relieved. It's hard lines on poor old Anne to have to pay up fifty quid though. How the dickens she managed to raise it is what beats me! She'll have to go tick for the rest of the year, I expect."

"You might have thought of that before, might you not?" said Matthew, who had no wish to proclaim himself as Spencer's benefactor.

"I might, as you very sagaciously remark. But the unfortunate thing about me is that I am not much in the habit of thinking. By the way, I don't suppose for a moment that you'll believe me, but I didn't steal that money. At all events, I didn't steal it intentionally, and what has become of it I know no more than the man in the moon."

"Since you tell me so, I believe you," answered Matthew.

"The deuce you do! You must be a precious sight more credulous than doctors in general then. My experience is that doctors, as a rule, won't believe you on your oath. Look at old Bowker, for instance, who will have it that I'm an habitual drunkard. As if I should mind owning to that, supposing it were true! All the same, it happens to be true that I'm not a thief, in the common sense of the word. I went to the races, not knowing how much I had in my pocket, backed the wrong ones, returned to barracks without a sixpence, and it wasn't until then that I found out what I had done."

Well, this might be the truth; but certainly a robust faith was required in order to accept such an explanation of the disappearance of fifty pounds from the possession of a non-commissioned officer, who, in all probability, could seldom have had fifty shillings to play with. Spencer must have felt that his story was a lame one, for presently he added with a laugh,—

"I believe I was robbed—if that improves matters. I'm sure I couldn't have staked the lot. But the fact is that I have never had any head for figures, and so I told those fellows when they insisted upon entrusting me with the mess-money. They ought never to have done such a thing."

Matthew did not inquire how and why money belonging to the sergeants' mess had come to be in the pocket of the man with no head for figures at a race-meeting; he merely observed,—

"Of course it would have been easy enough for any one to rob you while you were under the influence of liquor."

"Perfectly easy. As far as that goes, there isn't any very great difficulty about robbing me even when I am sober. Well, it's useless to cry over spilt milk, but, as matters have turned out, I wish I had allowed them to arrest me without a row."

"I wish with all my heart that you had. It is most unlucky."

"Very unlucky indeed for me. I don't know that *you* have any special reason for pulling a long face over it—that is, unless you have already begun to associate yourself with the misfortunes of the family." He stretched out his legs and indulged in a low laugh, which was evidently intended to be insolent. "The family is not looking up," he resumed. "I don't wish to breathe a word against your useful and admirable profession, but there was a time, not so very long ago, when we should have thought our woman-kind entitled to choose their husbands from a rather more exalted class."

Matthew kept his temper.

"I am not going to quarrel with you," said he good-humouredly—"please make up your mind to that; and at the same time let me assure you that your family is in no danger of disgracing itself by a misalliance, so far as I am concerned. There is nothing of the kind that you imagine between your sister and me."

"Really? Then why in the world are you here, I wonder?"

"Well, for a variety of reasons. Chiefly, I suppose, because somebody had to come, and because no one else happened to be available. I think I may venture to describe myself as your sister's friend, and it would simplify matters if you would accept me in that capacity. I should be very glad to act as your friend also, if I could see any way in which my friendship was likely to be of service to you; but, frankly speaking, I don't just at present."

For a moment Spencer Frere looked almost ashamed of himself; but he had resumed his previous air of bravado before he returned,—

"Oh, I'm much indebted to you, as it is. I know you have put yourself out to get the promise of a commission for me, and you must be wishing by this time that you had left the thing alone—especially as you disclaim the only motive which, I should have thought, might account for your behaviour. I am sorry that you saw fit to interest yourself in so worthless a specimen of humanity, but—well, I never requested you to do so, did I?"

No reply was forthcoming to this pertinent or impertinent query; but after a pause of some moments, Matthew asked abruptly,—

"How long have you been in the habit of taking morphia?"

His neighbour started and gave a low whistle.

"Now, how the deuce," he exclaimed, "did you know that I have been taking morphia? Bowker never thought of that, though he was the first man to administer it to me."

"I didn't know for certain—nobody could by looking at you; and of course it must be some days since you had your last dose. But there are several trifling symptoms which might possibly be due to that cause, and it is very evident to me that you have never been a tippler. Now, Frere, you had better take my word, as that of a medical man, for it that you must break yourself of this habit. It can hardly be a confirmed

one yet, and unless you beat it, it will assuredly beat you. In which case you might as well blow out your brains at once. You began in order to relieve some pain, no doubt—sciatica, perhaps?”

“No,” answered the other; “what let me into the secret was that about a couple of months ago my horse trod pretty heavily on my foot while I was dressing him. They had to remove a toe-nail, and for a few days the place hurt like blazes. So old Bowker injected morphia—which suggested a happy thought to me. Since it was so easy and comparatively inexpensive a matter to get rid of all one’s troubles, physical and mental, for a bit, why shouldn’t I treat myself to the luxury when I felt inclined? You may think that my mental troubles don’t press very severely upon me, but that’s all you know about it. There are times, I can tell you, when life in the British army is a precious good imitation of a hell upon earth. It isn’t so bad for N.C.O.’s, I admit; still I had worries of my own independent of the service.”

He paused and twisted his fair moustache gloomily, while Matthew remarked,—

“Worries connected with the other sex, I dare say.”

Spencer, who had been speaking without affectation and in almost penitent accents, instantly assumed an expression of fatuous self-complacency.

“Oh, the colonel has been telling you tales, has he?” said he. “Well, upon my word, I can’t help it! Women are always getting me into a mess; but it’s a great deal more their fault than mine. If they would only exercise a little common prudence, these encounters with irate husbands might be avoided, and——”

“But I thought the lady was a widow,” interrupted Matthew.

“What lady? Oh, little Mrs. Johnson. Yes, I believe Mr. Johnson is quite dead and buried; and, between ourselves, I have sometimes thought that it might be my destiny to replace him. I may do it yet—who knows? Beggars mustn’t be choosers, and although the fair Arabella—her name is Arabella—is not precisely

the incarnation of refinement, she has a snug little income of her own. Whether this business will put her off at all, I don't know; but I shouldn't think it would. She has such a high respect for my ancestry."

Matthew could not help for a moment regarding poor Mrs. Johnson in the light of a possible *dea ex machinâ*; but he put the thought away as being too cynical, and said rather severely,—

"It would be no bad thing if you had a little more respect both for your ancestors and for yourself. What possessed you to go and get drunk after you had discovered that that money was missing? Was it sheer recklessness?"

"That would have been it, no doubt, if I had gone out and got drunk; but, as a fact, I didn't. If you care to know what was the matter with me when I was collared, I don't mind telling you. I knew there was no chance of escape for me, and I made up my mind to chuck it. Life as a convict, or even as a ranker, isn't so delightful as to be worth preserving when you can put an end to yourself without pain. Only I suppose I didn't know how much morphia goes to a poison-dose, for all the effect it had upon me was to make me dazed and stupid. As soon as I found out that I wasn't going to die, off I started to the chemist's to buy some more, making fine zigzags on the way, I dare say. Anyhow, these blundering fools got hold of me and wanted to lock me up for being drunk in the streets. Some of them had a grudge against me, I believe; but whether that was so or not, I was bound to show fight. As I told you just now, I wish I hadn't; still if I hadn't I should have been charged with drunkenness all the same; so perhaps it doesn't make very much odds."

"I am glad, at all events, that you were preserved from committing suicide," Matthew remarked.

"It is very polite of you to say so; but my own impression is that my disappearance from these earthly scenes would have been a distinct advantage to some people and a misfortune for nobody. Will you please

tell Anne that I am infinitely obliged to her, but that she had much better drop me for the future? I won't go so far as to admit that I have always been a blackguard, but nothing can be more positive than that I am an irreclaimable blackguard now. She will never get any comfort out of me, and if she persists in befriending me I shall only get her into fresh trouble. The governor understands me a good deal better than she does."

A hardened miscreant would hardly have said that, Matthew thought. At all events, it seemed worth while to reason with him, and nobody could be more persuasive than Matthew, because nobody could have a wider range of sympathy with human nature in all its varying and contradictory phases. If, at the end of a somewhat protracted homily, Spencer Frere remained ostentatiously unrepentant, if he derided the popular axiom that it is never too late to mend, and if he refused to make any rash promises respecting his own future conduct, he nevertheless had the good grace to thank his mentor heartily.

"You mean well," he said. "I'm sorry I spoke so brutally about your profession—when a man is down on his luck he says all sorts of things that he doesn't mean, you know—and I'm really and truly grateful to you. What can I do to show my gratitude?"

"Well, you can do this," Matthew answered: "you can spare your sister as much as is possible. Of course, when you write to her, you will have to tell her about the court-martial and its results, but you need not say anything about the pecuniary part of the business. I am sure she would rather that you didn't, and I ask you as a personal favour not to do so. As regards the future, I hope I may trust you to refrain from appealing to her for pecuniary help again."

"Upon my oath, I never will; I don't mind binding myself to that extent."

"Very well. Then, as regards the present, I have one thing more to say. I don't feel at liberty to explain

exactly how I am situated, but so it is that I have a little money still left at your disposal, and the wish of your friends is that all outstanding bills should be paid. Will you tell me honestly how much you owe and to whom you owe it?"

Spencer complied with this request, naming a sum which fell short of Matthew's anticipations; and soon afterwards the two men parted. It was agreed that the younger should submit to the punishment which was his due, and possess his soul in patience for the time being. As to his ultimate destiny he seemed to be curiously indifferent.

"Oh, I shall live or die, sink or swim," said he with a laugh; "it will be all the same a hundred years hence, anyhow. But if ever I have it in my power to do you a good turn, Mr. Austin, you'll find that I haven't forgotten you."

CHAPTER XIX.

HUMBLE PIE.

MANY plausible arguments may be adduced in favour of hard-heartedness, but that to which the fullest support is lent by experience is that helping a lame dog over a stile means acquiring possession of that dog, together with the privilege of paying for his annual licence until the end of his earthly career. Now, one really cannot be expected to stock one's premises with curs, even if one could afford to do so. There are Homes for Lost Dogs (in which a well-appointed lethal chamber is provided), so that a man who is at once wise and humane will avert his gaze when he sees a luckless specimen of the canine race in difficulties. Who has not received those dreadful letters which begin, "Relying upon your kindness to me in the past, I feel encouraged to hope that you will assist me in the present emergency"? And who does not know that "the present emergency" implies future emergencies and many of them? "You have been fool enough to help me once," the writer seems to say, with pitiless logic; "it is therefore reasonable to believe that you will remain a fool to the end of the chapter." And the writer's sagacity seldom misleads him.

It was something of this sort that Matthew was saying to himself as he sat in the railway-carriage on his return journey to Wilverton. He had chosen to rush in where persons more legitimately concerned might very well have feared to tread; he had in a certain sense made himself responsible for Spencer Frere, and his responsibility could hardly end with the payment of that worthy's bills. The payment of the bills had in itself been a somewhat unpleasant job, exposing him

to queries from inquisitive tradesmen, and altogether rendering him more conspicuous than he could have wished. Colonel Egerton, moreover, though declaring emphatically that, upon his word, "the fellow ought to be devilish grateful to you, sir," had allowed it be inferred that he did not personally anticipate that result; while the taciturn Bowker had summed up the situation with the concise remark of "Mere question of time, you'll find."

"Still," reflected Matthew, "I don't see how I could have acted otherwise. It is on the cards that he may turn over a new leaf; it is on the cards that I may eventually be able to discover some opening for him; and even if I can't, there's no particular harm done. The most awkward thing of all will be my first interview with his sister. Whatever happens, she must not suspect that he has been charged with stealing, or that I have mixed myself up in the business. One comfort is that the story of drunkenness and insubordination will scarcely surprise her; she has had so many misgivings from the outset."

Nevertheless he had a powerful and pusillanimous longing to defer that necessary conversation with Anne, and much relieved was he to hear on the morrow that circumstances had granted him a respite. The Frere family—so he was informed—had departed to the seaside for a few weeks, leaving Hayes Park in the hands of painters and paperhangers; so that, unless he wrote to Spencer's sister—which he did not feel called upon to do—he might look forward to a period of tranquil and uninterrupted attention to his own affairs.

These were, for the moment, of a recreative rather than a professional nature. Wilverton was at its dullest and emptiest, patients were few, while well-ordered gardens might be said to be almost at their best. To breakfast leisurely and late, to saunter out into the sunshine, to count the buds upon the rose-bushes, to note with thankfulness the absence of green-fly and maggots, to hold long colloquies with the gardener, afterwards,

perhaps, to loll for half an hour or so in a hammock beneath the great copper-beach, with a book and a cigarette—all this was delightful to Matthew, who, unlike the majority of hard-working men, secretly adored laziness. Then, too, his letters were so pleasant to read that they could well bear a second and a third perusal. By degrees, and almost imperceptibly, the tone of Lilian's correspondence was changing, and the change, he thought, was decidedly for the better. There had been something unnatural, something almost insincere—though he did not make use of that term—in the vehement dislike which she had begun by expressing for London and its society, but which she had now suffered to drop into abeyance.

“After all,” she said in one of her voluminous, hastily-scribbled epistles, “I am glad to have seen what the smart world is like. I don't want to live in it; still, I can quite understand there being people who would rather not live at all than live out of it. Sometimes I wish you were here—no, I don't mean that; of course I *always* wish you were here, but I sometimes wish you could look on at my little triumphs. Would you utterly despise them, I wonder, or would you think there was rather more in me than you used to imagine? I feel hundreds and hundreds of years older than I did in those days, and mamma would tell you that I have immensely improved. I haven't changed, though—no, not the least little bit—and if she thinks I have she is very much mistaken.”

“But of course she must have changed in some respects,” was Matthew's inward comment; “it would be against nature if she hadn't. Besides, she admits it.” And always, in answering her letters, he was careful to say how little he grudged her the triumphs of which she spoke. Perhaps also he would not have minded looking on at them; certainly he would have liked very much to run up to London for a week or ten days. But he felt that he would hardly be fulfilling his part of the compact were he to yield to that temptation. Lady Sara had treated him fairly, not to say generously, and the least

he could do was to remain in the background until the stipulated truce should have expired.

Thus in unbroken quietude and almost unbroken solitude those warm days of early summer passed away for him pleasantly enough—blue, hazy days, during which light breezes from every point of the compass rose and fell, and the air was full of the song of birds, and fleecy clouds melted into mist towards sunset. A few lines from Colonel Egerton, who had good-naturedly asked for his address, informed him of Spencer Frere's sentence, which indeed had been a foregone conclusion.

"It's bad, but it might have been a great deal worse," the colonel wrote. "Perhaps the loss of his gold lace and a taste of the bread and water of affliction may bring him to his senses; still I can only repeat that I believe the best thing his father can do with him now is to take him out of this and pack him off to the Colonies."

At any rate, Matthew could take no step at present; so he laid the subject aside for future consideration, as doctors, lawyers, and other men whose duty it is to consider a variety of puzzling cases soon acquire a faculty for doing at will.

The end of this period of repose and seclusion was reached one afternoon when Mrs. Jennings stopped her carriage to beckon to him and express a gracious wish that he would show himself at her garden-party on the following day.

"I forget whether I sent you a card or not," said she. "If I didn't, it was only because I know that you eschew daylight entertainments. Of course you are quite right, and during the busy season Dr. Jennings will only accept even dinner invitations provisionally; but just now you must have a good deal of spare time on your hands, so I hope you will come to us. You will meet your friends the Freres if you do; I dare say you have heard that they returned home yesterday."

Matthew had not heard of that circumstance, but now that it had been made known to him, he felt compelled to swallow down the excuse which he had already opened his lips to formulate. Since Anne was once more within reach, it would not do for him to shirk an occasion of meeting her, nor was he sorry that their first meeting was to be a quasi-public one. A crowded garden-party—and Mrs. Jennings would have deemed herself socially disgraced if any party of hers had not been crowded—would afford better opportunities for the exercise of duplicity than could be hoped for from the afternoon call which politeness would render it incumbent upon him to pay ere long.

What disconcerted and even alarmed him a little was the manner of his reception by the lady whom he proposed to deceive. Soon after his arrival upon the scene of festivity he made his way to her side through an intervening throng of Browns, Joneses, and Robinsons, and it was without the faintest smile that she returned his greeting. Anne was looking very handsome in a new French-grey costume, which fitted her to perfection; she was also looking very grave, and she was so evidently displeased with him that her displeasure could scarcely be ignored. Did she think that he ought to have written to her? or had she, by means of one of those strange feminine processes of reasoning which must remain for ever inscrutable to the male mind, arrived at the conclusion that he was in some way to blame for the catastrophe that had overtaken Spencer? The only way to find out what was the matter was to ask her; so he began without preface,—

“You have heard from your brother?”

“Yes,” she answered, “I have heard from him; I must speak to you about it.—I am afraid,” she added, looking round her with an irritated frown, “there is no secluded place to which we can go; but if we were to get behind that brass band which is making such a horrible noise, we should at least run no risk of being overheard.”

The fact was that Mrs. Jennings’s pleasure-grounds

were of somewhat circumscribed area, and her invitation had been responded to by about three hundred people. These, however, in accordance with the national habit, had packed themselves closely together on the terrace fronting the house; so that comparative solitude was obtainable at a reasonable distance from the braying band, and on the farther side of the screen afforded by a clump of rhododendrons.

"Godfrey wrote to tell me of your brother's—misfortune," Matthew said. "Of course I would have let you know of it, only I felt sure that you would hear, and—and there wasn't much to be said unluckily."

"There was nothing to be said," assented Anne; "I never expected you to write." She added with an obvious effort, "I am extremely grateful to you for all that you have done for Spencer."

Neither her face nor her voice conveyed the impression of extreme gratitude; but Matthew hastened to assure her that nothing of the sort was owing to him.

"There was no great trouble involved in writing a few letters and calling at the War Office," he remarked. "I only wish the result had been more successful. As it is, I am afraid our hopes of getting a commission must be laid aside for some little time to come."

"He will never get his commission now; I was not thinking of that," Anne rejoined. "Of course, we are very much indebted to you for having secured him the chance; but debts of that kind may be submitted to, I suppose, without—without downright humiliation. What I cannot understand your having imagined is that we would allow you to pay a large sum of money for us secretly."

Matthew's jaw fell.

"Confound the stupid idiot!" he ejaculated inwardly. Aloud he said, "I am afraid your brother must have broken his word. He promised me that that part of the business should be between ourselves."

"Have I not always warned you," returned Anne with a dreary little laugh, "that there is no dependence

to be placed upon Spencer? He did not betray you in his first letter, but I knew, from the way in which he expressed himself, that there must be more behind, and by degrees the whole story came out. I am glad it has come out, though I can't pretend to be glad that you should have——"

"Been so impertinent and officious?" suggested Matthew, since she seemed at a loss to conclude her sentence. She neither confirmed nor disputed the 'sentiments ascribed to her; so he went on. "I am very sorry that you have heard of this, and still more sorry to have offended you; but I am sure, if you will think of it, you will see that I couldn't have acted in any other way. It was absolutely necessary that the money should be paid, and there was no time to consult anybody. If I had driven out to Hayes Park upon the chance of seeing you after Godfrey's letter reached me, I should have been too late."

Anne had pulled one of the tough leaves off the shrub beside which she was standing, and had begun to tear it into strips.

"I know that you saved him, and I know that we can never be thankful enough to you for your promptitude," she answered slowly. "But why did you make a secret of it? Why did you leave me to find out for myself what you had done?"

"Was it so very unpardonable that I should wish to spare you all the distress I could?"

"Oh, not unpardonable, perhaps; but I think—well, I think it was rather a mistake. I suppose you would not quite like it if you were to discover that I had been paying your tradesmen's bills for you?"

"My dear Miss Frere, I have not been paying any bill for you, and it would never occur to me to take such a liberty. Surely, if I feel inclined to give or lend fifty pounds to a man of my acquaintance, that is a matter which only concerns him and me."

"It was a good deal more than fifty pounds; but the question, as you know, was not one between you and a

man of your acquaintance. You gave Spencer to understand that the money came from me ; how can you tell that he would have accepted it if you had spoken the truth ? ”

Matthew wished with all his heart that he had told the truth, for he felt very sure that Spencer's scruples would have been easily overcome. All he could find to say for himself was,—

“ I acted for the best.”

“ I quite believe that you did,” Anne replied, in somewhat less severe accents ; “ only—however, there is no use in saying any more about it. Of course you must be repaid.”

This was exceedingly painful, and the worst of it was that refusals or protests could only give additional offence.

“ What have I done,” Matthew exclaimed, after a rather long pause, “ that you should treat me with such unfriendliness ? Why may I not remain your brother's creditor for a time ? Indeed it is not at all an uncommon thing for a man to borrow a small sum from a friend in an emergency. If I have never done it myself, that is simply owing to the accident of my never having been hard up ; I should be afraid to say how many times I have lent money to other people.”

“ And how many times have you received your money back ? But nothing was said about a loan in this case. You represented to Spencer that the money came from me, and it is I who am responsible to you for it.”

In vain Matthew declared that, to the best of his recollection and belief, he had made no such misrepresentation. He had, he candidly owned, allowed her brother to form his own conclusions, but that had been merely as a measure of expediency, and to avoid needless discussion. For the rest, he would, if she wished it, write a few lines to Lowcester that evening and explain.

Anne would have none of these specious excuses. Her name had been made use of, she said, and Mr. Austin must surely understand that it was impossible for her to accept either a loan or a gift of money from him. This

was very dignified and quite unanswerable; but poor Anne, to her shame and sorrow, was unable to follow up her declaration of independence by practical proof of it. Her pale face flushed distressingly, and she had to clear away an obstruction in her throat before she could continue,—

“Unfortunately, I must ask you to allow me a little time, and to let me discharge my debt by instalments. My allowance, as I think I have told you before, is not a large one, and I have had a good many unforeseen expenses lately. I do not see how it can be less than a year——”

“Miss Frere,” interrupted Matthew, “I think you are behaving most unkindly and ungenerously, and it doesn’t seem to me that I have deserved such treatment. However, since you will have it so, let it be so; I do not wish you to feel that you are under any obligation—even an imaginary one—to me. But at least I may be allowed to mention that it will make not the slightest difference to me whether I am repaid to-day or ten years hence. The only doubt in my mind is whether I am justified in keeping all this from your father’s knowledge any longer.”

“Ah, you are determined to spare me nothing!” exclaimed Anne, clasping her hands together. “But of course you are quite right; I have no business to assume false airs of pride when I ought to be humbling myself in the dust before you. If you tell my father—and that, I have no doubt, would be the proper thing to do—you will be thanked as you deserve, and Spencer’s debts will be paid once more.”

“Only you would rather that I did not tell?”

Anne looked down.

“It would be the last straw,” she said. “Spencer would never be forgiven—never! Oh, I know I am ungenerous and ungracious. I can’t help it. You must think what you please of me, but I do *hate* to have to ask this additional favour!”

“Then you shall not ask it. From purely selfish motives I am reluctant to let Mr. Frere know that I

have been busying myself on the sly with his family affairs, and I don't intend to do so. I must admit, too, that allowing your name to be dragged into this business was both stupid and unwarrantable on my part. Your brother, by my way of thinking, might very well have accepted a little temporary aid from me; but I quite understand that you cannot—or will not. Will you accept my sincere apologies, and believe that, however thoughtless and clumsy I may have been, the last thing that I meant, or could have meant, was to humiliate you?"

He extended his hand half involuntarily, and Anne's gloved fingers advanced to meet it.

"You are as generous as I am the reverse," she said constrainedly. "One is what one is; there is no help or it. Still, I don't think I am altogether in the wrong."

Matthew, to tell the honest truth, thought she was; so he held his peace. He did not venture to inquire whether she had formed any fresh project on her brother's behalf; still less could he think of proffering assistance. It was just as well that the colloquy was now broken off by the appearance of Mrs. Frere, and before long he made his escape.

"It is what I foresaw from the outset," his hostess remarked to her spouse later in the day; "that foolish young man has been jilted already, and I must say that it serves him right."

"Eh?—jilted?" echoed Dr. Jennings, not ill-pleased at the supposed discomfiture of his ambitious rival. "Who told you that?"

"There are things," replied the good lady oracularly, "which one doesn't require to be told if one has eyes in one's head. He only came here because he was afraid it would create remark if he didn't; he scarcely spoke to anybody, and when I inquired, before he left, what news he had of Lady Sara Murray, he was downright sulky. Well, well! I really can't pity him; he should have more common sense."

CHAPTER XX.

LILIAN MEETS AN OLD ACQUAINTANCE.

WHATEVER assertions may be made to the contrary, there never yet lived the woman to whom admiration was unwelcome. They are so fond of saying this about themselves—or at least about one another—that it is safe to accept the accuracy of the statement upon such unimpeachable authority; and indeed, *mutatis mutandis*, it applies to ourselves as much as to them. We all want to succeed, we all like applause, the only difference between us and the ladies in that respect being that our opportunities of attaining pre-eminence are far more varied than theirs. Consequently, there was nothing surprising in Lilian Murray's gradual reconciliation to a notoriety which many of her compeers would have given ten years of life to share. She was probably the most beautiful girl in London; she was admitted to be the most beautiful in that small section of the community which is styled great by reason of its rank or riches; and everything leads the unprejudiced looker-on to believe that that position must be delightful and intoxicating while it lasts.

That it cannot, in the nature of things, last long was what Miss Murray's experienced relatives were never weary of impressing upon her. They added (in case she should not know it) that the glory of being a reigning, unmarried beauty is not so much valuable for its own sake as for what it may be expected to bring; and when she told them that she was engaged to be married to a country doctor, they only laughed, affecting to treat so absurd a statement as a good joke. She began by telling everybody that her heart and her hand had already been disposed of; but after a time she ceased

to thrust unasked-for information down the throats of the indifferent. If everybody likes to be admired, nobody likes to be laughed at, and it was perhaps sufficient to have perfect confidence in one's own immutability.

At all events, there was no treachery to Matthew in enjoying the whirl of gaiety and excitement into which she was plunged almost from the very beginning of her fashionable career. She might have retorted "*Tu l'as voulu, Georges Dandin,*" if he had displayed any epistolary uneasiness; but, on the contrary, he seemed not only contented but glad that she should see as much as possible of contemporary society. And she took to it all (notwithstanding the recalcitrancy exhibited in her earlier letters to her betrothed) as a duck takes to water. In a very short space of time she heard and saw a great deal; she soon picked up current phraseology, possibly also current notions of morality; there was not nearly as much difficulty about teaching her her lesson as there is about drawing out the hereditary instincts of a thoroughbred horse or a setter of high pedigree. It is true that she maintained certain mental reservations; but these she now knew how to keep to herself.

It was on a Sunday afternoon when the season was at its height that she was taken to Tattersall's by some of those good-natured kinsmen and kinswomen of hers who were wont to relieve Lady Sara of the burden of chaperonage. On a Sunday afternoon at Tattersall's in the month of June one meets, if not quite everybody, at least a large proportion of the illustrious beings who are thus designated amongst themselves, and Miss Murray was speedily surrounded by the usual throng of smooth-shaven young men in long frock-coats. She was entirely at her ease with these gilded youths; her aversion for them as a class was a thing of the past, and although she snubbed some of them she was amiable enough with others. The truth is that they were by no means disagreeable young men, while the remarks of some of their number with regard to horseflesh and racing were worthy of being listened to. Lilian, to be

sure, was not specially interested in either subject; still she allowed herself to be conducted by a sporting peer in close proximity to the heels of a long string of hunters, and, when he indicated their several blemishes, nodded her head confirmatively. Most of us can contrive to detect the obvious as soon as it has been clearly pointed out, and there is a distinct satisfaction in feeling that we know a little more than other people, to whom that advantage has been denied.

Lilian, therefore, was thinking to herself that, although it was very hot and there was a dense crowd, and the stable was not quite as well ventilated as it might have been, she was better off upon the whole than if she had stayed at home or gone to church, when she suddenly became aware of a smartly-attired gentleman who was not only taking off his hat but holding out his hand to her. Over the wrist which he was not holding out hung a slim umbrella with a large crook handle, and to this she pointed, as she returned his greeting, remarking with a smile,—

“Out of the sling, I see. I congratulate you.”

“Oh, I threw away my sling ages ago,” answered Leonard Jerome. “Thanks for your congratulations, all the same. Allow me in return to congratulate you very sincerely.”

“Upon what?”

“Well, I suppose I might congratulate you upon a heap of things—at any rate, the society papers tell me so—but only one of them is worth mentioning. Dear old Austin may be a lucky beggar, and I believe he is, but I’m bound to say that I think you are in luck too.”

“I think I am,” answered Lilian gravely.

She would have had some difficulty in explaining why Mr. Jerome’s frankness of speech irritated her; perhaps it is never very pleasant to be called lucky; perhaps also she doubted the honesty of his felicitations upon an engagement which everybody else had agreed to regard as a matter for condolence or ridicule. Instead, however, of manifesting her feelings, as she would have

done a few months earlier, she passed on through the throng with Leonard Jerome, deserting her sporting nobleman, who was at that moment anxiously examining the bruised stifle of a weight-carrier.

"I have seen you more than once from afar," Leonard resumed, "but you are rather unapproachable in these days. Would it be permitted to a humble rustic acquaintance to call upon Lady Sara? She told me I might, you know."

"We shall be charmed," answered Lilian, furnishing him with her address, which he at once wrote down.

"And may I hope that you will be a little less savage with me now than you used to be when I was so constantly and so unfortunately in the way?"

"Was I savage? Well, I dare say you were rather in the way sometimes at Wilverton; but you won't be in anybody's way here; there isn't room. One doesn't notice the elbows of one neighbour in particular amongst such a host of elbows and neighbours."

"I suppose not. And how do you like London as compared with Wilverton? It's absurd to ask though. London must be Paradise to a few privileged folks, and I presume it won't be very long before the sole attraction of Wilverton takes his ticket for the metropolis. Please, when you write to Austin, tell him from me that I'm looking out for him."

"I am afraid even that inducement would not persuade him to leave his work," answered Lilian, with the smiling, inattentive look which women are fond of putting on when they wish to annoy their male companions. "He does not talk of coming up to London."

"Then," rejoined Leonard emphatically, "all I can say is he is a duffer. He ought to be here."

They were standing in the glazed central yard, and Miss Murray's brown eyes, which had been roving towards distant corners, were now slowly turned upon Mr. Jerome with an air of disdainful interrogation. "Do you mean to be impertinent?" they seemed to say.

"Possibly you do ; but it is of no consequence. Your impertinence would be scarcely worth noticing."

Relations might have become strained if Lilian's cousins had not just then hastened up to take her away to a tea-crush. After hesitating for a moment, she introduced him to them, and so took leave of him without repeating the hand-shaking ceremony.

A few days later he called at the tiny house in Mayfair which Lady Sara had hired for the season, and was received with the prompt "Not at 'ome" that might have been anticipated at five o'clock in the afternoon.

"Jerome?" said Lady Sara, when she picked up his card out of a number of others and scrutinized it through her glasses; "is not that the young man who broke some of his bones down at Wilverton last winter?"

Her ladyship's memory, it will be perceived, could no longer retain the names of such insignificant persons as the heirs-presumptive of obscure country gentlemen, and in truth she had clean forgotten having ever contemplated Leonard Jerome as a potential son-in-law. She now dreamt, and was to all appearance justified in dreaming, of far more exalted connections.

Bitter disappointment was, however, in store for her. What was the use of having achieved a brilliant, an almost unprecedented, success if nothing was to come of it? And Lilian seemed determined that nothing should come of it. One of the saddest days of poor Lady Sara's life was that on which her daughter quietly informed her that she had just refused the eldest son of a prodigiously wealthy contractor, whose virtues and riches had recently met with deserved recognition in the form of a peerage.

"It is sheer, downright madness!" the unhappy lady exclaimed. "This makes the fourth, and much the best, chance that you have thrown away. Anybody—anybody in England might have been proud and thankful to make such a match! Lilian, dear, what *can* you expect?"

"I expect to marry the man of my choice some day," the girl responded composedly.

"Oh, poor, dear Mr. Austin! Of course he is very nice and very good; but really——"

"Really what?"

"I hoped you had given up thinking of him, that was all. You haven't spoken about him for such a long time."

It was true that Lilian had given up speaking about the subject, because she knew that it was one upon which her mother's sympathies could not be with her; but she had never wavered in her allegiance, nor did she for a moment distrust herself. Only she did, every now and then, wish that there were somebody to whom Matthew's name might be mentioned without fear of ridicule. And perhaps it was because Mr. Jerome was always willing, and even eager, to expatiate upon the manifold merits of his medical friend that she learnt to look with a pleasurable anticipation for the sight of Leonard's handsome face.

The sight was seldom denied to her, after that preliminary encounter at Tattersall's which had so nearly terminated in a quarrel. Whether by accident or by design, Mr. Jerome was at almost all the resorts of public and private amusement to which she was taken, and it soon became a matter of course that he should lose no time in making his way to her side.

"You are a sort of safety-valve," she told him one evening, when he had taken the liberty of thanking her for her softened demeanour towards him; "I can say things to you which I am not allowed to say to anybody else in London. Besides, you dance beautifully."

They frequently met at balls, and it was only natural that, having one important bond of union, they should proceed to discover others. Lilian's early prejudice against the man who was now her favourite partner had quite disappeared; she began to feel a sincere interest in him and his affairs, about which he was always ready to discourse openly, and she acknowledged to herself that Matthew had not been far wrong in calling him manly and unaffected. For the rest, their intercourse

was not uninterruptedly friendly. Leonard, in his jealous zeal for his absent friend, occasionally took the liberty of remonstrating with her upon what he was pleased to call her flirtations, and when he ventured to do this he was promptly sent to Coventry until he saw the error of his ways, and came, with deep humility, to implore forgiveness.

"I know I am officious and impertinent," he told her once, "but sometimes it is out of my power to hold my tongue. You have a way of looking at men—I dare say it means nothing—I'm sure it means nothing; but there are moments when—well, when I simply can't stand it."

He had to make his apologies a good deal more abject than that before they were accepted; but the period of estrangement seldom lasted for more than forty-eight hours. The truth was that he had gradually become essential to Lilian's comfort, and, after all, since her conscience did not accuse her, why should she make such a fuss about a little vicarious jealousy? Leonard heard of some of the advantageous proposals which she had declined, and great was his joy on being made aware of them. He could not have displayed more satisfaction if he had been Matthew himself. Indeed, she often wondered whether Matthew would have displayed half as much.

Now it came to pass, one fine afternoon in the beginning of July, that Lady Sara and her daughter drove to the mansions near Albert Gate where Mr. Jerome rented a flat, having been invited by that gentleman to take tea with him and meet his sister, Lady Bannock. He had before this been several times admitted to the Murrays' little house in Tilney Street, where he had been made welcome by Lilian's mother, who had always thought him a pleasant sort of young man, and was quite willing to be introduced to his bachelor abode and his influential relatives.

Lady Bannock was really influential, being the wife of a Scotch peer whose means were abundant and who was given to hospitality. She was a plump, good-

natured little woman, without any vestige of her brother's comeliness of form and feature—which may have been one reason why her admiration and affection for her brother knew no bounds. Doubtless she had been instructed to be particularly agreeable to her brother's friends; for she greeted the two ladies with effusion on their entrance, saying that she had heard so much about them from Leonard and had been wishing for a long time past to make their personal acquaintance. Lady Sara and she were soon deep in one of those conversations relating to common friends which are so engrossing to the persons concerned and so desperately uninteresting to everybody else. Lilian, meanwhile, took a leisurely survey of Mr. Jerome's reception-room, which was lofty and sunny, which commanded a prospect of green trees and of the crowded park beyond them, and which was furnished in admirable taste.

"You know how to make yourself comfortable, I see," she remarked to her entertainer, when he brought her a cup of tea.

"Do you like these rooms?" he asked. "Well, if one must needs live in London, I dare say one is as well off here as anywhere else, and I thought, upon the whole, I would rather make my home in a few small rooms amongst other civilized beings than shiver in one corner of a great empty house on the north-east coast. They only just hold me though."

"I should have thought you might have been contained in a smaller space than this; but perhaps you have large ideas. What do you consist of here?—drawing-room, dining-room, bedroom, and bath-room?"

"Yes; and I have one small spare room and a smoking den."

"What more can you possibly want? In our wretched little bandbox we are obliged to turn round with precaution, lest we should break through the outer wall and tumble out into the street. Is it allowable to inspect your premises?"

Leonard made the only reply that could be made;

but it struck her at once that he did not make it with alacrity, and she said no more. After a time, however, he complied with her wish of his own accord, and conducted her into his dining-room, which was of ample dimensions and was rendered attractive by Chippendale chairs, a fine old oak sideboard and a few excellent etchings. When she had examined and expressed her approbation of these, he turned back into the corridor, and throwing open the door of a small room adjoining the drawing-room,—

“This is my private dog-kennel,” he said, without entering. “There’s nothing to see in it.”

He could hardly have adopted a surer method of convincing her that there *was* something to see in it, and, being a woman, she was unable to resist the temptation of pushing past him.

A moment later she regretted her curiosity ; for there, staring her in the face, was only too evidently the thing which he had not desired to exhibit to her—namely, a full-length photograph of herself in a heavy silver frame. It stood upon the writing-table near the window, and was much too big and conspicuous to be ignored. Lilian pointed to it with her forefinger.

“I don’t remember giving you that,” she said quietly, yet in a voice which boded no good to the unlicensed proprietor. “Where did you get it?”

Leonard, who had become very red in the face, made a somewhat unsuccessful effort to recover his *aplomb*.

“I got it from the photographer,” he confessed ; “please don’t kill him. He was most unwilling to part with it, and only yielded when I had recourse to subterfuges. In fact, I am afraid I left him with the impression that I was an authorized person.”

“I see,” said Lilian. “Well, as you are not an authorized person, and as you seem to have come into possession of this work of art by means of what you prettily call a subterfuge, it can hardly be considered your property.”

She picked up the frame, withdrew the photograph

from it, and, tearing the latter across, put the pieces in her pocket.

"You will have to find a substitute," she remarked. "There are plenty of actresses and other celebrities whose portraits you can purchase without any need for subterfuge or any breach of the law."

He tried in vain to make his peace with her; he affirmed—truly or untruly, and in any case very ill-advisedly—that his intention had been to procure a likeness of Matthew, as a *pendant* to that of which he had been deprived, and he assured her, with equal clumsiness, that nobody, except herself and his man-servant, was aware of his indiscretion. The only reply that she vouchsafed to him was a contemptuous shrug of the shoulders, and her immediate return to the drawing-room robbed him of all opportunity for further allusion to the matter.

"Lady Bannock is quite charming," Lady Sara remarked to her daughter on the way home. "She wants us to stay with them in Scotland towards the end of next month, and if she repeats her invitation, I think we may as well accept it. We shall be in their neighbourhood, you know."

"Shall we?" asked Lilian absently.

"Why, my dear child, have you forgotten that we have been asked to stay at three houses?"

"Oh, of course; but you said it would have to depend upon your health, and Scotland is so cold. Don't you think you would be better at Wilverton?"

"In August!" Lady Sara paused for a moment and then said emphatically, "I hope and believe that there will never be any necessity for us to return to that place."

Probably she expected some rejoinder, but she received none. Only Lilian, who knew that her will was stronger than her mother's, said to herself,—

"It may not be Wilverton, but it shall not be Lady Bannock's. I can answer for that!"

CHAPTER XXI.

BANNOCK LODGE.

TOWARDS the middle of July—which chanced that year to be a dull, rainy, and oppressive month—Matthew began to be vaguely disquieted about Lilian. She no longer wrote to him with her former regularity; her letters, when they came, were shorter, far less circumstantial, and invariably opened with a sort of irritated apology for her remissness, which she did not ascribe, as she might have done, to stress of engagements, but to lack of any topics worth writing about.

“It is always the same old story over and over again,” she declared; “you must be as sick of hearing about these things as I am of doing them.”

To her meeting with Leonard Jerome she had made no allusion; and at this omission Matthew was a little surprised, because Leonard himself had made a point of writing to report the circumstance; but possibly that might be one of the incidents which Lilian deemed unworthy of special mention. It was, however, noticeable that from the date of its occurrence she became more and more imperative in her entreaties to her betrothed to come up to London, if only for a day or two.

“I think you *ought* to come, and I think it is hardly fair upon me that you don’t,” she had written once, using, as it happened, almost the identical language employed by Leonard Jerome upon the same subject. But the coincidence—which indeed he regarded as a coincidence pure and simple—neither suggested misgivings to Matthew’s mind nor shook his resolution. He felt in honour bound to let Lady Sara have a free hand, and this was in substance the reply that he made to both his correspondents.

Nevertheless, on this moist, muggy, airless morning, as he stood by his dining-room window, with an open letter in his hand, and stared at the drenched geraniums and begonias and calceolarias, he was asking himself whether, after all, his duty was quite as clear as he had hitherto imagined it to be. Had he not, perhaps, been thinking rather too much about what he owed to the mother and hardly enough about what he owed to the daughter and to himself? He turned once more to the sheet of notepaper which he had already perused more often than was necessary in order to master its contents.

"For the last time," Lilian wrote, "will you come and see me? I suppose you must wish to see me, as you always say that you do, and unless you come soon, I can't tell when we shall meet again, or even"—here a few words were very carefully erased. "At the end of this month," she went on, "we are going to stay with some people in Hampshire, and after that there will be visits upon visits until the winter, as far as I can see. If I could have had my way we should have returned to Wilverton at the end of the season; but what can I do, now that all these invitations have been accepted? You think, no doubt, that you are behaving chivalrously, and, in a way, I dare say you are, but you might remember sometimes that it is a little hard to have to do *all* the fighting."

Possibly it was a little hard; possibly so—as indeed she seemed almost to hint—the fighting operations which she had to undertake were not directed solely against such feeble opponents as her mother and a family council. Only, in that case, she ought surely to be left to undertake them alone. If she was beginning to repent ever so slightly of her impetuous promises, if there was a shadow of doubt in her mind as to whether she had not made her choice too hastily, it would be ill done on his part to intervene or to bring any sort of pressure to bear upon her. This was Matthew's final conclusion, and he was all the more sure of its being a right conclusion because he would so gladly have decided otherwise.

"She will think," said he to himself, "that I don't care enough about her to come to her aid when I am called. So be it! I would a thousand times rather have her think that than lead her into doing what can never be undone, and what she may regret when it is too late."

It was a relief to put these views, or something equivalent to them, into writing, to close the envelope, stamp it, and dispatch it to the post, beyond reach of recall. There are cases in which the real truth—*la vérité vraie*—must not be told; all one can hope for is that a truly sympathetic soul may contrive to read between the lines. There was at least this to be said, Matthew reflected, casting about him somewhat forlornly for stray scraps of consolation, that he had done Lilian no injury. If he had a rival, and was destined to have a supplanter, that happy man would, no doubt, be a rival and supplanter of the right sort. The danger which he had formerly dreaded on her behalf, the danger that she might through indifference or ignorance be induced to espouse some aged aristocrat or millionaire had, he felt sure, been conjured away. And it is one of those melancholy duties which fall to the share of a faithful historian to add that Mr. Bush received an unusually sharp lecture that day. Bush considered such rebukes unmerited and uncalled for, and did not hesitate to say so. He could not, he remarked, control the "helements." He likewise expressed a decided opinion to the effect that his master's health and temper, "sim'lar to plants," were suffering from abnormal atmospheric conditions, and he made so bold as to strongly advise a change of air.

It might be that Bush was in the right; there was no need to be a physician in order to know that occasional holidays are requisite to keep mind and body in good condition, and Matthew began to think of a few weeks of Switzerland or the Tyrol. Change of air, change of scene, something that would induce a sort of false oblivion, something that would, at all events, help to make the time pass away—that was the prescription which

he would have given to anybody else, and why should he not apply it to himself?

The Continent of Europe, however, was not fated to be trodden by his wandering feet that year; for while he was still dallying with the idea of a foreign trip—and this half-hearted dalliance occupied his leisure for some little time—there came to him a letter from Leonard Jerome which diverted the current of his plans and wishes into quite another channel.

“My sister, Lady Bannock,” Leonard wrote, “is awfully anxious to know you, and I am commissioned by her to say that, if you will excuse an unceremonious invitation, and come to us in the Highlands about the last week in August, she will feel immensely honoured and flattered and all the rest of it. Do come, like a good chap, and give an old friend the satisfaction of seeing your face once more. You needn’t shoot unless you like, but I may tell you that it won’t matter a bit if you shoot badly. Bannock can’t hit a haystack at fifty yards, and I’m no great shakes, and we should as soon think of asking a crack shot to stay at Bannock Lodge as of publishing our record. So, if you have got a gun and a rifle, bring them with you, and if you haven’t you can be supplied on arrival. All this won’t tempt you, I dare say; but I know what will. Lady Sara Murray and her daughter are going to join our small house-party some time between the 20th of August and the 1st of September, and unless I am much mistaken, one of them will be as pleased to see you as I shall be—which is saying a lot.”

Well, this heartily-proffered hospitality was very tempting, and acceptance of it seemed to be legitimate; because it had been pretty well understood from the first that Matthew’s period of banishment was to be counterminous with the close of the London season. After considering a while, he replied by a letter of warm thanks and conditional acquiescence, writing at the same time to Lilian, who was now in Hampshire, to tell her of the

project, and state that he would be guided entirely by her wishes in the matter.

What Lilian would say he was by no means sure. Their correspondence, since his reluctant refusal to respond to her last appeal, had languished perceptibly ; she had made no disguise of the fact that she was hurt and disappointed ; she had gone so far as to declare that pretty language did not, in her opinion, atone for supineness, and it now seemed quite upon the cards that she might see fit to punish him by declining tardy reparation. But no such unhandsome revenge was, it appeared, contemplated by her. The return post brought Matthew a missive couched in much more affectionate terms than those which he had received of late, and in it Lilian proclaimed the delight with which she would now look forward to her visit to Bannock Lodge.

"I was rather dreading it," she avowed, "because, as you are aware, I am not particularly devoted to your friend Mr. Jerome, and I hardly know Lady Bannock ; but this makes all the difference. I shall begin to count the days at once, and when you write to Mr. Jerome, you may tell him from me that I am pleased with him. He evidently understands that his society is hardly an attractive bait enough in itself."

Thus it came about that, on a windy, showery evening of late summer, the hero of this narrative reached the unpretending shooting-lodge in Ross-shire which was more often tenanted by Lord Bannock's friends than by its owner. Matthew, who had had a long drive from the nearest railway station, and who had been enjoying the keen, invigorating air, the flying shadows of the clouds upon the hillsides, and even the occasional down-pours of pelting rain, was glad, when his destination came in sight, to perceive that the building was not of a size to accommodate many guests. He had, in obedience to instructions, brought his gun with him (a rifle he did not possess), but he had by no means decided to use it, nor was he ambitious of making an exhibition of himself in the presence of a large number of spectators.

His hostess proved to be as simple and unpretentious as the establishment over which she was at that time presiding. She came out to the doorstep to welcome him, and, after ascertaining that he was not in the least fatigued by his journey, said,—

“You had better come and have some tea with me now; Leonard and the others will be back before long. We are quite a small party, and for the present I have only one lady, Madame d’Aultran, who is out shooting with the men. I doubt whether they are blessing her, but she would go. Leonard tells me that you are not a very enthusiastic sportsman.”

“I can’t call myself a sportsman at all,” Matthew answered. “I don’t think I have had a gun in my hand more than twenty times since I was a boy, and as I never so much as saw a grouse upon its native heather, I must not venture to compete with your lady friend.”

“Oh, you will have to shoot,” Lady Bannock returned, laughing good-humouredly; “there is absolutely no alternative. Even my husband shoots when he is here, much as he hates it. My husband is a hunting-man, and just now he is a yachting-man, *faute de mieux*. He has gone off for a few weeks’ cruise, leaving Leonard to do the honours, which is much the best arrangement. Leonard, as I dare say you have discovered, does everything well.”

“Except, perhaps, cycling?”

“Oh, poor fellow, yes. I never heard of anything more pathetic than his being driven to such extremities by his desire to behave dutifully to Uncle Richard, who, between ourselves, is a horrid old man. Still, the accident was not altogether to be deplored, since it was the means of bringing you and Leonard together.”

Lady Bannock was very friendly and chatty across her well-furnished tea-table. Presently, as was inevitable, she alluded to the approaching visit of Lady Sara Murray and her daughter; but she asked no questions, and Matthew’s gratitude for her forbearance was enhanced by a suspicion that she felt some curiosity as

to the precise state of his relations with her future guests.

"Leonard was very anxious that they should be asked," she explained, "and I shall be only too delighted to have them; because I presume they won't bring gun-cases, like Madame d'Aultran. Probably they will be contented to go up on the hill with me and the luncheon sometimes."

"And I hope I may be allowed to form one of the party on those occasions," Matthew said.

"Well, I don't know about that; you will have to do what Leonard tells you. I believe he has set his heart upon your bringing down at least one stag, to exhibit as a trophy to Miss Murray."

"As if there were the remotest chance of my ever being able to hit a stag!"

"You will if you get the chance. Stags are very big animals, and there is always plenty of time to aim. Lord Bannock declares that it is only the good shots that miss, and that they only miss through over-anxiety. He accounts for his own success by saying that the whole thing is such unqualified misery to him that he doesn't care a straw what happens when the critical moment comes. Leonard is much more keen; but then Leonard never does anything by halves."

Assuredly there was nothing half-hearted about Leonard's welcome of his friend. He appeared, after a time, in his shooting-boots and knickerbockers, and greeted the new arrival with almost boisterous effusiveness.

"We should have been home an hour ago," he said, "only that awful woman kept us back. She got dead-beat, as I knew she would, and wanted to sit down and take a nip out of somebody's flask at every hundred yards."

"Can she shoot?" Lady Bannock inquired.

"Oh yes, she can fire off any number of cartridges. She can't *hit* anything, except by accident. Mercifully, she didn't hit any of us. Well, it's all in the day's work, and there's no harm done. We're only a shooting-party *pour rire*, you know, Austin."

"Leonard is so good-tempered!" Lady Bannock murmured explanatorily.

Indeed, it was evident that, in the opinion of this fond sister, Leonard possessed every virtue which can adorn a human character. He seemed, at least, to possess in a remarkable degree the virtue of hospitality; for nothing had been neglected to make Matthew comfortable, and when the latter went upstairs to dress for dinner, he found that various trifling predilections of his had been remembered and provided for. It is in this way, much more frequently than by substantial benefits conferred or sacrifices submitted to, that affection is won.

However, it was a genuine and substantial kindness to have asked a duffer to a Highland shooting-lodge at all, and so our hero felt, after he had descended to the low-pitched drawing-room and had been introduced to the four men who were his fellow-guests. These stalwart, sunburnt gentlemen did not convey to him the impression of being sportsmen *pour rire*, and would probably have been as much surprised as displeased to hear themselves described in such terms. They were polite, but he fancied that they scrutinized him with a certain apprehension, and he gathered from a few muttered remarks which he overheard that their patience had been sorely tried that day.

"Well, they needn't be alarmed," he thought. "Nothing shall persuade me to spoil their sport; and if the lady wants to go out to-morrow I will go with her. Then, perhaps, they will recognize that I am a blessing in disguise."

But the Vicomtesse d'Aultran, who presently entered, and whose brocade and diamonds looked a little out of keeping with her close-cropped, artificially-curled blonde hair, her pince-nez and her would-be mannish carriage, lost no time in proclaiming to all and sundry whom it might concern that she had had enough of such sport as was obtainable in her present quarters.

"This shooting over dogs is no fun at all," she asserted.

“Why do you not have your birds driven, as they do in Yorkshire, where I was staying with Lord Towers last year? That was worth the trouble of going out for; but here—I am sure you will pardon me for saying so, dear Lady Bannock—I have been thinking all day what a wise man Lord Bannock is to *ficher le camp*! Tomorrow I stay in bed until midday and read Pierre Loti’s last novel—*c’est positif*!”

She spoke English with ease and fluency. She was a plain-featured little woman, but her self-satisfaction was evidently undisturbed by any inkling of her physical disadvantages or any suspicion of the relief with which her statement was listened to by her audience. Her husband—so Leonard whispered to Matthew—was attached to the Belgian Legation, and she was considered to be capital company. It cannot, however, be said that Matthew, who found himself placed beside her at the dinner-table, felt disposed to subscribe to the general verdict in that respect.

“I am enchanted to have met you,” she was kind enough to tell him, after champagne had started a sufficient flow of general conversation to admit of asides; “I was dying to see the *fiancé* for whose sake the beautiful Miss Murray is said to have spurned more than one coronet.”

“I trust,” said Matthew, “that I come up to your expectations.”

“Oh, my expectations are of little consequence; the important affair is that you should satisfy Miss Murray’s expectations after a period of separation so full of events and experiences for her. Do you not feel nervous?”

“I doubt whether I should confess it if I did,” Matthew replied. “Are you thinking of making a long stay in Scotland?”

But Madame d’Aultran was not to be diverted from her subject.

“That depends,” said she. “Lady Bannock is charming; but she comes here to rest after the fatigues of the season, and she is quite happy to do nothing all

day long. That is very well for persons of a certain age, but it is not my idea. I am one of those who demand perpetual amusement. Possibly you may provide me with some—you and your lovely *fiancée*—for I adore a romance.”

She proceeded, with a frankness which he could not sufficiently admire, to state her reason for hoping that this particular romance might not be unaccompanied by dramatic episodes. She had watched Miss Murray in London, she said, and was of opinion that volcanic fires lurked beneath that calm surface.

“You may be her master,” the outspoken lady concluded, “but it is certain that, if you are, you are not *le premier venu*. And have you no fear at all of any of these gentlemen? It seems to me that, under the circumstances, a little fear would not be out of place. However, we shall see.”

Before leaving the room, she gave Matthew a cigarette out of her silver case and, placing another between her own lips, bent over one of the candles to light it.

“I shall never become accustomed to your barbarous practice of dismissing us as soon as dinner is over,” she remarked.

But since nobody manifested the slightest desire to depart from established rules for her benefit, she had to follow her hostess; after which the talk was of grouse and nothing else until bedtime.

It was at a comparatively early hour that the weary sportsmen, who naturally wished to keep their eyes clear, retired; and Matthew, not feeling sleepy, had ensconced himself in an armchair with a book, before his bedroom fire, when a rap at the door was followed by the entrance of Leonard Jerome. Leonard had ostensibly come to insist upon it that his friend should not shirk the duties of the morrow, and he explained that the party would be divided, “so that you and I can go with old Standish, who is the best-natured fellow in the world and won’t criticize either of us.” But the true purport of this nocturnal visit became apparent to a close observer when he inquired carelessly,—

"By the way, what was that horrid little Belgian woman saying to you about Miss Murray at dinner? I could see by her face that she was talking about Miss Murray."

"Nothing libellous," answered Matthew, laughing; "she only thought it kind to warn me that there might be rocks and shoals ahead. I suppose I did not strike her as presenting the appearance of a lover who could afford to risk rivalry with younger and more fascinating men."

"Impudent little wretch!" exclaimed Leonard; "I hope you snubbed her as she deserved. She wouldn't be here, I can assure you, if she hadn't invited herself. She didn't—er—caution you against anybody in particular then?"

"She mentioned nobody in particular. Is there anybody in particular whom she might have mentioned?"

"To the best of my belief, not a soul," answered Leonard, with a certain eagerness. "It's an open secret that Miss Murray has refused some good offers; but of course you know that. And I do hope, old man, that you'll lose no time now in getting everything settled. As far as I can understand, Lady Sara won't be obdurate, and—and surely this ordeal has lasted long enough!"

"Perhaps it has," Matthew replied slowly. "Anyhow, you have given me an opportunity which might have been deferred indefinitely but for you, and no friend could have done more."

"I have tried to behave like your friend and—and hers," the other declared; "I suppose, as you say, nobody could do more for you than to bring you together."

He fidgeted about the room for a few minutes, and then remarked, "Well, I'm off to bed, and you had better follow my example. You'll be ready enough to turn in by this time to-morrow night, I expect."

CHAPTER XXII.

MATTHEW'S TRIUMPH.

"So, after all, you are not going to stay at home and pretend you don't know how to shoot, Mr. Austin," Lady Bannock remarked, glancing at Matthew's knicker-bocker breeches, when he came down to breakfast the next morning.

"There's no pretence about the matter, I assure you," he answered; "but I have been ordered to go out, and all I hope for is that I may be ordered home again early in the day. If your brother would only believe me, it is no sort of pleasure to me to spoil other people's sport."

"And if you would only believe me, you *can't* spoil anybody's sport at this game," Leonard declared. "You aren't being asked to take a part in a swagger battue, and you may miss every single bird that rises to you with a perfectly clear conscience. Not that you are a bit more likely to miss than I am."

But not long after the tyro, accompanied by his friend and Colonel Standish, a wiry little man with a brown face and grizzled moustache, had set forth and had breasted one of the hills by which the house was surrounded, he began to suspect, for his comfort, that not too many chances of exhibiting his incapacity would be accorded to him. To right and left of him his companions got a shot apiece and killed their respective birds neatly; soon afterwards the same thing occurred again, with a similar result, and Matthew was inwardly blessing them for their foresight and consideration in having placed him in the middle when a covey of six rose suddenly directly in front of him. This time he was bound to fire; so he selected his bird and was even more astonished than relieved to see it stop and fall. No-

body said a word, which caused him some momentary disappointment; but the fact was that the other two men were far too intent upon their work to waste time in paying him compliments. One of them might be what he had proclaimed himself, a bad shot (the other had not indulged in unnecessary self-depreciation), but certainly there was very little bad shooting that morning. Regard for truth compels Mr. Austin's biographer to state that what little there was was provided by the hero of this narrative; still he might have done a great deal worse, and perhaps it was rather wonderful that, with his total lack of practice, he did so well.

"I knew you were an old humbug," Leonard said when at length a halt was called; "at this rate, you'll be taking the shine out of us all next week."

"Two brace and a half, I believe," answered Matthew modestly; "but I am afraid it ought to have been four brace."

"Oh, I don't know; you seemed to me to take every chance you got, except perhaps one. Upon my word, we're in luck to-day, though! I never expected to see so many birds, did you, Standish?"

Colonel Standish smiled and said,—

"No, by Jove, I didn't! If those other fellows want to beat us they'll have to look sharp."

But he was evidently anxious to get on; and so, for the matter of that, was Matthew, who was already bitten with the sport-fever and was no longer in terror of committing some dire solecism. The task set before him was, after all, straightforward enough, and reminiscences of his boyhood enabled him to avoid glaring misbehaviour. Then, too, the air was exhilarating, the exercise was invigorating, it was a joy to watch the dogs working, and happily, when he missed, he missed. If it be cruel—and there is not much use in denying that it is cruel—to slay wild birds and beasts, the guilt involved in so doing is at least no greater than that of consenting to the daily slaughter of sheep and oxen. But it is not pleasant to cause torture through clumsiness; and that is why

many a man ought never to raise a gun to his shoulder. Matthew, who, it must be owned, had had some reason to suspect himself of being such a man, was proportionately thankful when he was able to sit down upon the heather and partake of a well-earned luncheon without cause for self-reproach, save that his contribution to the bag might have been larger.

"Oh, you'll do," Colonel Standish interrupted his apologies by saying good-naturedly; "all you want is to get accustomed to the thing. I'd a good deal rather go out with our friend here than with Bannock, eh, Jerome?"

"Rather!" answered Leonard heartily. "As far as that goes, I haven't a doubt that Austin would make me look small most days of the week. I happen to be rather on the spot to-day, for some reason or other."

The fact is that both of these gentlemen were pretty well pleased with themselves, and were consequently disposed to be pleased with everybody and everything else. That they were somewhat less successful after luncheon than they had been earlier in the day was due in part to the fact that they did not meet with quite an equal measure of luck and partly to the heat of the sun, which made one of them lazy. Leonard Jerome, indeed, as Matthew had often had occasion to notice, was not a man who cared to stick to anything very long, and before four o'clock he was quite willing to leave Colonel Standish with the keeper.

"I'm sure you must have had more than enough of this, old chap," he said to his other guest, "and I dare say you'd like to stroll back and see what letters have come for you."

No letters, it subsequently appeared, had arrived for Mr. Austin; but Lady Bannock, who was discovered drinking tea placidly on the lawn, beneath the shade of a gigantic Japanese umbrella, informed him, after hearing of his prowess and offering her congratulations, that she had received one in the contents of which she presumed that he would be interested.

"The Murrays will be here to-morrow afternoon," she said. "I shall be almost as delighted as you will be to see them, for I really don't feel equal to undertaking Madame d'Aultran single-handed. What do you think she has just been doing, Leonard?"

"Who?—Madame d'Aultran?" asked Leonard, whose colour had faded on a sudden, and who did not seem to be quite himself. "Oh, I don't know; something funny, no doubt."

"Well, it was funny to look at, but I am not sure that she found it as good fun as she had expected. She said she must positively be amused, and, as my company doesn't amuse her, nothing would do but that she must ride the Shetland pony. I warned her that he bucked and kicked; but she declared she could sit anything; so we had him out and managed to get a side saddle on his back, and Madame d'Aultran jumped into the saddle. Up went his heels, of course, and in about two seconds she was sent flying. I believe she is upstairs now, repairing damages; but the sound of your voices is sure to draw her out again."

"Then let us on no account speak above a whisper!" exclaimed Matthew.

But that precautionary measure was taken too late, and it fell to his lot to entertain the vivacious little Belgian lady until the shooting-party reappeared, Leonard having basely fled and Lady Bannock presently begging to be excused, on the plea that she had letters to write. Madame d'Aultran had bruised her knees and scratched her hands; but she confided to Matthew that such trifling inconveniences were a small price to pay for a few moments of excitement. She catechized him as to his first impressions of grouse-shooting, and was good enough to say that she would perhaps go out with him on the ensuing day.

"Before evening, *grâce à Dieu!*" she added, "we shall have your *fiancée* here, and then, I hope, there will be fun."

Neither then nor later was she invited to explain herself; though she evidently wished to be questioned and

seized every opportunity that offered to revert to the subject. Matthew was not the man to discuss his *fiancée* with anybody, and if this vulgar and irrepressible woman succeeded in lowering his spirits, he was properly ashamed of having allowed her to do so.

But he did not sleep that night as well as he ought to have done after such a fine dose of fresh air and exercise; nor, alas! could he contrive to bring down a single grouse on the morrow. Madame d'Aultran, mercifully, had thought better of her fell intention and was not yet out of bed when he set forth with his companions of the previous day; yet, after a time, he almost wished that the Vicomtesse had joined the party. Her presence, he thought, would at least have been some excuse for the amazing lack of dexterity with which the keeper's lengthening face mutely reproached him. However, Leonard and Colonel Standish were as good-natured as possible, and would not hear of letting him beat a retreat.

"You shall be released in plenty of time," the former assured him, laughing; "I give you my word that it isn't possible for any visitors, travelling by road or rail, to reach the house before four o'clock."

Colonel Standish was even more explicit.

"Don't worry yourself," the weather-beaten little soldier took occasion to say encouragingly to Matthew while offering him a drain out of his flask; "no man can shoot when he's worried. I know well enough what's the matter; bless you! I've been through it all myself ages ago. Yet, here I am still, a bachelor at eight-and-forty, you see, and I might be a precious sight worse off! This locket," continued the colonel, tapping his watch-chain, "contains a scrap of her hair; she is now a Mrs. Something Thomson and has I forget how many children. It wasn't for Thomson that she threw me over though; there was another fellow before him, and my belief is that all women are tarred with pretty much the same brush. I don't say this to put you off, you know; only I mean—it doesn't signify quite as much as you think it does."

He concluded with a friendly tap upon the younger man's shoulder and a laugh which sounded oddly pathetic and compassionate.

Did the kindly little man intend to convey a note of warning? It might be so; for he mixed a good deal in fashionable society, and doubtless he had heard things. Well, the warning was not required. Matthew was prepared, and had been prepared all along, for any contingency that might arise: moreover, he had the consolation of knowing that in a very few hours he would be out of suspense. Nevertheless, he could by no means induce his hand and eye to work together, and eventually—to the keeper's undisguised relief—he gave up trying.

The afternoon was not very far advanced when he quitted the sportsmen and wandered slowly along the hillside towards Bannock Lodge. He was troubled on his way by sundry absurd doubts and misgivings. Would Lilian wish him to return in advance of the other men? Might she not prefer that their meeting should take place just before dinner? How would he meet her?—and in what manner would she expect him to greet her, if—as would probably be the case—her mother and Lady Bannock and Madame d'Aultran were present as spectators of the scene?

But all these questions were delightfully answered and all these foolish doubts set at rest by the sudden apparition of a slight figure in a tweed dress and jacket and a waistcoat of the most approved pattern. Down dropped Matthew's gun upon the heather; he stretched out his arms involuntarily, and the next moment Lilian's head was upon his shoulder.

"They didn't want me to come out and meet you," she said, after the interchange of certain more or less inarticulate speeches which there is no need to place on record, "but I hoped that perhaps you would be walking back alone, and I was determined not to be confronted with you before them all. Well, are you glad to see me again, Mat? And, now that you do see me,

what do you think of me? Have I improved or deteriorated?"

He was able to answer the first question in the affirmative without hesitation; as for the others, it was necessary to wait a little longer before making any replies which could be pronounced at once truthful and satisfactory. But so far as mere outward appearance went she had certainly improved, and for the rest, she did not allow him much time to speak. She was voluble, she was excited, she had a hundred things to tell him and a hundred more to ask him about; there was no trace in her manner of that constraint which had at one time been painfully apparent in her correspondence. Every now and again she interrupted herself to say how thankful she was to be near him once more.

"It is a clear case of Providential interference!" she declared; "and if we had only a patron saint apiece—as, of course, we ought to have—it would be our duty to supply them with any number of the best wax candles."

"I don't know whether Jerome would care about wax candles," remarked Matthew; "but he has undoubtedly shown himself our patron on the present occasion. Perhaps he could hardly be described as a saint though."

"He?—oh no, he's a distinct sinner. There was a St. Jerome once upon a time, wasn't there? He must have been very unlike his modern namesake. Of course you have a lot of other stupid sort of men staying in the house?"

"Surely you don't class Leonard Jerome among the stupid sort of men!"

"Oh, well it doesn't matter whether he is stupid or clever, for he will be out shooting all day long, I hope and trust. You won't want to shoot every day, will you? I suppose it will be acknowledged that we are privileged persons and that we may go off by ourselves—you and I."

"Is that at all likely to be acknowledged?" Matthew asked.

"It *must* be," answered the girl decisively. "Mamma admits now that the engagement must be formally an-

nounced. Don't you understand that she couldn't have come here unless she had made up her mind to the inevitable?"

"She is still opposed to it, then."

"I don't know. I think she is still rather surprised at my obstinacy; but she is as fond of you as ever, and at the bottom of her heart she is longing to see you again and tell you all about her rheumatism. O Mat, if you could but realize what a relief it is to have you on the spot! Do you know that all this time you have been behaving very much as if you didn't really want to marry me at all?"

The least he could do was to demonstrate that there was no shadow of foundation for that impression; and, in truth, the task was not a difficult one, although it proved somewhat protracted. And on his side, how could he doubt any longer that Lilian's love for him was genuine and permanent? It had stood the test of absence; it had withstood every temptation by which its stability could have been assailed, and although, like Lady Sara, he might—and indeed did—marvel at his own triumph, he was bound to accept, with due humility and gratitude, the fact that he had triumphed.

It was with humility, if not precisely with gratitude, that Lady Sara herself accepted that indisputable fact. She told him so before he had been five minutes in her bedroom, whither he was summoned immediately upon his return to the house, and long before he had concluded the medical examination which he was requested to institute.

"I believe I have done all that any mother could do," she said—as though she owed Matthew some apology for her failure—"but Lilian is too self-willed for me. I can only let her have her own way now and trust that she may not live to repent."

"You do not flatter me," Matthew remarked, smiling.

"Oh, it isn't you; you are as good as gold, and I don't know why a reasonable woman shouldn't be perfectly happy with you. But Lilian isn't reasonable.

I can't understand her, and I suppose I shall never feel quite easy about her to my dying day. In many ways she reminds me of my poor sister, about whom you have heard, of course. However, we will hope for the best."

"It seems to me that we are entitled to do that," said Matthew. "At any rate, if she is not happy with me, the fault shall not be mine. You have been very good to me, both of you."

"You have been very good to us," Lady Sara returned. "It stands to reason that I should have preferred a different sort of alliance; but, in all truth and sincerity, there is no man in England whom I should have preferred to you, personally!"

It was, therefore, as a formally engaged man that Matthew went downstairs shortly before the dinner-hour. He found his betrothed in the drawing-room with Leonard Jerome, who at once stepped forward to shake him by the hand and wish him joy. Lady Bannock was told; everybody in the house was told; and it must be confessed that everybody looked a little surprised.

"Small blame to them!" the bridegroom-elect reflected. "It is a surprising thing, and I myself am quite as much surprised at it as they can be."

He could have wished, however, that Leonard had been less noisily congratulatory, and that, having proclaimed his friend's good fortune, he would have consented to let the subject drop. Something of this sort Matthew whispered to Lilian, who shrugged her bare shoulders and returned,—

"Do you object? I don't. I suppose Mr. Jerome wants to make us feel uncomfortable; but he hasn't succeeded with me, and I hope you won't let him imagine that he has succeeded with you. As far as I am concerned, the whole world is welcome to know that I am going to marry the best man in the world."

Upon the whole, that was a very happy evening for Matthew. It certainly was not spoilt for him by sundry ironical utterances of Madame d'Aultran's, nor did he

so very much mind Leonard's pleasantries, although some of them struck him as being in rather bad taste. Yet, for some reason which eluded his mental grasp, there was a perplexing sense of unreality about it all. The oddest thing was that, when he bade Lady Sara good-night, she gripped his hand nervously, and he saw to his astonishment that there were tears in her eyes.

"I wish we had not come here!" she exclaimed on a sudden. "But I think Lilian is in earnest—oh, I am sure she *must* be in earnest! And you quite understand—don't you?—that the whole thing has been her doing. I have no hold over her nowadays—none whatsoever!"

Now, it was simply impossible to doubt that Lilian was in earnest. Matthew assured himself of that before he went to sleep, remembering also that women in Lady Sara's state of health are likely enough to become hysterical and fanciful under the influence of emotion.

"Perhaps I may not have been told quite everything that happened when they were in London," was his final conclusion. "Well, I don't want to be told everything; nobody but an arrant fool does. It is sufficient for me to know that she loves me still."

CHAPTER XXIII.

FRESH LAURELS.

THE modern Ang'ican clerics who (without previous training or experience or any superabundance of mother-wit to guide them in their wielding of a dangerous weapon) have sought to revive auricular confession must, one would think, be led to form some queer conceptions respecting the depravity of human nature. Indeed, it is noticeable that this is what generally happens to them—with resultant blunders of a serio-comic kind. Upon the whole, it seems most prudent to rest satisfied with the exhaustive knowledge which we all possess of the thoughts and deeds of one human being (a most sympathetic and pardonable creature he or she always is), and to avoid prying too closely into those of our neighbours.

"I tell my husband everything," a lady once declared to the insignificant individual who had the honour to take her in to dinner. Whereupon he ejaculated, before he could stop himself, "Then thank God I am not your husband!"

It was partly because Matthew Austin was a gentleman and partly because he was no fool that he studiously abstained from questioning his betrothed as to every episode which had occurred during the period of their separation. There had been something—that much he could see in the course of twenty-four hours—but he could not quite make out whether she wished to tell him about it or not, and, in any case, he was resolved to manifest no curiosity. What if she had hesitated for a moment?—what if she had met with somebody whom she might, under different circumstances, have cared for sufficiently to marry? Was it not pre-

cisely for that purpose that he had wished her to pass through a London season? And was not her fidelity to him infinitely more convincing and satisfactory now that it had been fairly tried?

He would indeed have been sceptical and exacting if he had not been convinced of her fidelity. During their long, solitary rambles, while the men were on the hill and the ladies more or less occupied indoors, she gave him clearly to understand that neither in London nor elsewhere had she met with his equal. She was affectionate; she was touchingly submissive; she asseverated, until he was ashamed of saying any more about it, that the monotonous existence of a country doctor's wife had no terrors for her; her one anxiety seemed to be to please him, and she implored him again and again to point out her faults to her, so that she might try to correct them. Yet, for all that, there had been something; perhaps there still was something. Every now and again she let fall an obscure hint, but, meeting with no encouragement, reverted to other topics.

"Since you are so very eager to be convicted of sin," Matthew said to her laughingly one afternoon, "I will mention a small matter in which I should like to see you change, and that is in your behaviour to poor Jerome. I know you have never liked him; but is it necessary to treat him with such persistent incivility?"

"Am I uncivil to him?" asked the girl indifferently.

"Well, I think you are, and I think he feels it. After all, we are considerably indebted to him—you and I—and it seems rather ungrateful and ungracious to take every opportunity of impressing upon him that you prefer his room to his company."

"I will endeavour to be grateful and gracious, then. How am I to begin? Shall I offer to join the guns, like that horrible little Belgian woman who is always making eyes at you?"

"No, you might stop short of that; but perhaps it would have been kinder to go out with Lady Bannock

and the luncheon to-day when he asked you. He was evidently disappointed."

"Poor fellow! And poor you, too; for I suppose I disappointed you into the bargain with my selfishness. Of course you must want to shoot; what else are you here for?"

Matthew assured her, with absolute sincerity, that that temptation would never have drawn him to the Highlands; but she shook her head.

"I don't believe a word of it," she returned; "you can't possibly prefer wandering about all day long with me to shooting grouse. It would be against nature—against masculine nature, anyhow. No; we shall have the evenings together, and sometimes, perhaps, a bit of the afternoons, and always the middle of the day; for no luncheon-basket shall be complete without me henceforth. That ought to be enough; and so it is. I shall have to put up with a smaller share of your company than that after we are married, I dare say."

She did not seem to be at all offended; but he was not altogether successful in persuading her that by consenting to take his gun out of its case once more he was showing himself as unselfish as she was. For the rest, he really thought that they ought to display a little more consideration for their host and hostess. He had an uncomfortable feeling that he was making rather too much of a convenience of them both.

Lady Bannock, it may be presumed, cared very little how her guests might see fit to divert themselves, so long as they left her in peace; but Leonard looked decidedly gratified when he was informed the next morning that Matthew would like to be allowed one more chance of missing easy shots, and that Miss Murray proposed to accompany the servants and the provisions to the appointed halting-place at midday. In order that the two parties might forgather at a given place and hour, he at once cancelled certain arrangements which he had made, and probably Colonel Standish was alone in deploring the substitution of a sort of picnic for a hard day's sport.

As for Matthew, he enjoyed the picnic all the more because, during the two hours or so which preceded it, he had been shooting very fairly well and had been deservedly complimented. Modest though he was, he was not sorry to be able to give a good account of himself to the ladies.

"It seems," observed Madame d'Aultran, who had decided to grace the occasion with her presence, "that one can bring a few grouse down when one likes. You have eclipsed Mr. Jerome to-day—eh?"

It had been no very hard matter to eclipse Mr. Jerome, who complained of a headache and who begged to be excused shortly after parting company with his sister and her friends. Matthew would willingly have walked home with the deserter, but was restrained both by the protests of Colonel Standish and by an intimation that Leonard did not want him. He therefore remained out until the dinner-hour was not far distant, acquitting himself so creditably that even the keeper bestowed a grim smile upon him, while his companion said,—

"You would make a fine shot, Mr. Austin, if you cared to practise, and, by my way of thinking, it's worth everybody's while to cultivate his natural abilities. There are times, you know, when a man gets down on his luck; but if there is any form of outdoor exercise at which he is tolerably good, he knows where to look for consolation."

"I hope I shall always have my work," Matthew answered, "and when I find that discouraging—as of course doctors often do—I shall have the joys of the domestic hearth to turn to."

"H'm!" grunted the colonel; "the joys of shooting are a certainty: the joys of the domestic hearth ain't. Take my word for it, there's no certainty about anything where women are concerned."

As if to back up this *ex parte* assertion, Madame d'Aultran, who was seated beside Matthew at dinner that evening, must needs remark maliciously,—

"You Englishmen have droll ways of treating your wives and daughters, not to speak of your *fiancées*. One

would suppose that you thought women were to be trusted."

"Perhaps we do think that Englishwomen are to be trusted, and perhaps we are right," said Matthew.

Madame d'Aultran laughed stridently.

"And your Divorce Court, which is always busy?" she returned. "*Enfin!*—it is better to use one's eyes too soon than too late. If I were in your place, for example, I should take the liberty to ask Miss Murray what was the interesting subject which she and our handsome friend Mr. Jerome were discussing this afternoon. It must have been very interesting, since they had to walk about together for more than two hours before they reached the end of it—if indeed they reached the end of it then."

Matthew was not much more likely to put the suggested question than he was to be alarmed by Madame d'Aultran's impertinent warning; but later in the evening Lilian volunteered the information for which she had not been asked.

"I have made friends with Mr. Jerome," she said. "We had a long walk this afternoon, and we talked about you the whole time."

"That must have become a little monotonous, didn't it?" said Matthew, laughing.

"No," answered Lilian, with a slight smile; "there were a good many things to be said. Plans to be formed for your amusement, too, lest you should find life in the Highlands a little monotonous. By the way, do you know that you are to go out for your first stalk to-morrow?"

"I was not aware of it, and I can assure you that I don't intend to do anything of the sort."

"Oh, you will have to obey orders; all the arrangements have been made. Besides which, I want the antlers to decorate our entrance-hall at Wilverton. Can't you see Mrs. Jennings examining the head through her glasses and inquiring where we bought it? 'Oh, that is one of the stags that my husband shot in Sect-

land last summer,' I shall say in an off-hand way. 'He is rather fond of shooting when he has nothing better to do.' "

"But, my dear child, it is in the last degree improbable that I shall kill a stag, even if I am given the chance; and I have heard that stalkers are not particularly fond of giving beginners a chance."

"Well, you will have to try, at all events, and Donald or Angus, or whatever his name may be, will certainly be forbidden to play tricks with you. Here comes Mr. Jerome to tell you all about it."

Leonard seemed to be really anxious that his friend should not quit Bannock Lodge without having had at least one day's experience of deer-stalking, and as everything appeared to have been settled, Matthew could hardly refuse his assent to a scheme which, to tell the truth, was not wholly distasteful to him. "Madame d'Aultran will have no words to express her sense of my imprudence to-morrow evening," he thought, with some inward amusement.

Assuredly, no misgivings of the nature alluded to by Madame d'Aultran disturbed his mind when he seated himself, early the next morning, in the dog-cart which was waiting for him at the door and was driven off towards the glen where he was to put himself in the hands of his guide. He had passed the age of irrational jealousy; besides which, he happened to know for a fact that Lilian was somewhat irrationally prejudiced against Leonard Jerome. If they had now composed their differences, so much the better; disloyalty was the last thing of which he could suspect either of them. On the other hand, he was beset by very serious misgivings as to his own ability to accomplish the task that lay before him that day, and the first thing that he said to Alick, the stalwart, brown-bearded individual who wished him good-morning on his arrival at the trysting-place, was,—

"Now I want you to understand that I know nothing about this business—absolutely nothing at all! I will

try to do what you tell me ; more than that you mustn't expect."

"Indeed, sir, it is not every gentleman that will do so much," answered the other, with a quiet smile.

In spite, however, of this promising beginning, Matthew's first act was one of insubordination ; for he resolutely declined to mount the rough little pony which one of the attendant gillies was leading. He thought it would be a good deal less tiring to scale the hillside on foot than to perch himself on that very uncomfortable-looking deer-saddle, and Alick did not insist. Only, to tell the truth, he had not bargained for quite so long or quite so precipitous a walk. The time for adopting precautions evidently had not yet come ; the deer, he gathered—for he did not like to ask too many questions, and not much information was vouchsafed to him—were still miles away ; progress, measured by the distance covered, seemed to be slow ; yet it was all he could do to keep pace with the easy strides of the stalker and the gillie, who never turned a hair, and who, in truth, were taking things very easy out of mercy to the uninitiated stranger. A sudden heavy shower which drenched Matthew to the skin scarcely added to his discomfort ; a man in a Turkish bath has no objection to cold water. But all this (as, indeed, he had been previously warned) was nothing. There are acute miseries connected with deer-stalking ; but a preliminary stroll uphill must not be accounted one of them. Even if he had thought of uttering a complaint, or of asking, as forlorn passengers are wont to ask the stewards of cross-Channel boats, whether this sort of thing was likely to last much longer, he could not have found the breath to do it. Onward and upward he plodded in patient silence, wondering sadly whether, when the decisive moment came, he would be able so much as to attempt aiming with such a shaking hand and clouded eye.

He had no need to feel anxious on that score ; for many weary hours had to elapse before the approach of the decisive moment, and ample time to grow cool in

person and in nerves was reserved for him. The reconnoitring process, when at length a post of vantage had been reached; the blurred vision of a remote herd at which he was bidden to gaze through the telescope; the consultation between Alick and the gillie; the interminable, circuitous tramp up hill and down dale; and then—ah! then—the excruciating crawl, first on his hands and knees and afterwards on the flat of his stomach, through a great dismal swamp—these were experiences which, when Matthew subsequently looked back upon them, appeared to him to have spread themselves over a respectable slice of his lifetime.

However, by sedulously watching and imitating his pioneer, he at least avoided doing anything wrong, and his relief was greater than his excitement when at last Alick stealthily beckoned to him to draw near. Yet it must be confessed that it brought his heart into his mouth to discern six fine stags lying down on a grassy space beneath him and not a hundred yards off. He drew in his breath and held out his hand for the rifle. But Alick, to his surprise and disappointment, made a negative sign and began a noiseless retrograde movement. There would be no chance of a shot—so he was presently given to understand—until the deer got up and began to feed again; it was not yet one o'clock—Good heavens! not yet one o'clock!—and a further delay of an hour and a half, or perhaps two hours, must be submitted to.

That long wait was certainly the worst part of the entire ordeal. Little comfort was to be got out of a few saturated sandwiches and a short pull of raw whisky; smoking was impossible, and although Alick and the gillie exchanged some whispered remarks, Matthew did not dare to join in their conversation. Had he been a keen sportsman, he would doubtless have been miserable enough; but he was not particularly keen, and his misery was intensified by the conviction that all this tremendous outlay of skill, labour, and perseverance would prove to have been utterly wasted. He was sorry for himself and sorry for Lilian, but chiefly he was sorry

for poor Alick, whom he could never venture to look in the face again after the failure which he felt to be a foregone conclusion. All the greater, therefore, was the joy of ultimate success.

"I can't in the least tell you how it happened," he said, giving as circumstantial an account of himself as he could to Lilian that evening; "all I know is that it was an easy broadside shot, and that I was so paralyzed by terror of missing that I obeyed instructions quite mechanically. He went like the wind for about eighty yards and then dropped, stone-dead. Alick thinks I might have got another, but he comforts me by saying that I was right not to fire unless I was pretty sure. Pretty sure indeed! Well, at any rate, I am pretty sure of one thing now, and that is that deer-stalking is worth the trouble. Only it is too exciting for a sober old country doctor like me, and I am not going out again. At least, not until next time."

As matters fell out, no "next time" ever came, and that fine head remains Matthew Austin's unique trophy of the kind. But as long as he lives he is likely to preserve in all its freshness the recollection of his one day's stalking—of the moment when Alick handed him the rifle, silently indicating the stag at which he was to aim, of the unspeakable satisfaction with which he heard the thud of the bullet as it struck, of the well-earned pipe afterwards, and of the long, triumphant march home through sweeping showers and flying gleams of sunshine. Upon certain other incidents of his visit to Bannock Lodge he has not cared to dwell with equal frequency, and these have consequently lost clearness of outline in his memory. Happily for us all, we are so constituted that we remember the good days of the past, while we begin to forget pain from the moment when it ceases to hurt us.

CHAPTER XXIV.

USQUE RECURRET.

LILIAN spoke the truth (and it must be said for her that she almost invariably did speak the truth) in telling Matthew that he had been the chief subject of conversation between her and Leonard Jerome during that protracted colloquy which had excited the curiosity of Madame d'Aultran. But the subject had not been of her choosing, nor had she greatly enjoyed hearing her future husband's praises sung at such inordinate length and in a tone which seemed to imply that she might not be fully alive to the extent of her good fortune. She would have talked about something else, only that that had appeared quite the safest thing to talk about, and that, for various reasons, some of which were not very clearly defined, the question of safety had to be taken into consideration. At all events, she had no desire to revert to it on the ensuing day, and she learnt with some annoyance that Mr. Jerome was still feeling too unwell to go out shooting with the other men. At luncheon Lady Bannock made a prodigious fuss over him, pressing him to eat certain delicacies which had been specially prepared with a view to tempt his palate, and appealing to Miss Murray to say whether he was not looking wretchedly ill. As a matter of fact he was looking rather pale, and Lilian, after a hasty glance at him, unfeelingly suggested a couple of pills; but, as he pointed out to her, it was impossible for him to carry out her prescription then and there, and, since he saw fit to hang about the house the whole afternoon, it proved equally impossible for her to avoid his society. They had a game of billiards together, during which she was absent-minded and taciturn, and then, towards evening,

he proposed that they should walk up the glen and meet Matthew, who ought, he said, to be nearing home by that time.

Lilian replied, with a yawn, that she had no objection; so they set forth, and before they had proceeded very far on their way he began somewhat abruptly,—

“I have always wanted to explain to you about that photograph, Miss Murray. I can’t tell you how sorry I was to have given offence by what I really thought at the time was a harmless little indiscretion.”

Now, Lilian had repeatedly seen him and conversed with him since the occurrence of the episode alluded to, and she saw no reason why he should choose this particular moment to remind her of an indiscretion which she had neither forgotten nor entirely forgiven.

“I don’t know what possible explanation you can give,” she answered curtly, “and I haven’t the slightest curiosity to listen to one. It is generally considered bad form to buy a photograph of a girl with whom you are acquainted and exhibit it on your table, as if she had presented it to you; isn’t it?”

“But I didn’t exhibit it,” pleaded Leonard eagerly; “I kept it in my own private den, where nobody could see it except myself.”

It was upon the tip of Lilian’s tongue to rejoin that he was not improving his case; but she thought better of it, and only said impatiently,—

“Oh well! it doesn’t in the least signify now, one way or the other. If you want my photograph, I am sure you are welcome to it, and I will look one out for you as soon as I go in. Which will be immediately,” she added, as a warning drop of rain fell on her cheek. “I don’t want to be soaked.”

Soaked, however, she was; for she persisted in walking straight back to the house, notwithstanding his entreaties that she would take shelter under the lee of an overhanging rock until the shower should have passed.

“Is this necessary?” he exclaimed at length. “You might keep comparatively dry and get rid of me, you

know. I am perfectly willing to walk on by myself and meet Austin."

"In your present precarious state of health!" she returned, with a short laugh. "Oh no; you must come home and be taken care of. What would Lady Bannock say if you were to catch a cold in your head?"

He splashed along silently by her side for some little distance before he remarked in a low, reproachful voice,—

"I thought we had made friends."

"Did you?" said Lilian; "I didn't."

"But *why* not? What have I done? How can I help—well, I shall only make matters worse by saying more, I suppose; but I do think you are rather unmerciful and rather——"

"Rather what?" asked Lilian, standing still and facing him fiercely.

"I was going to say unwise; but never mind! I won't say that. Only may I remind you that it was I who brought Austin here, and that I have done everything in my power to serve him and you?"

This, at least, was undeniable, and she reflected with compunction that his charge of unwisdom was likewise scarcely open to refutation. It had been her fault, not his, that he had now practically avowed what both of them had known for a long time past. So she said,—

"Oh, very well; we will call ourselves friends, then, if you like; though I doubt whether we shall ever hit it off together very well. Of course it goes without saying that Matthew and I are much indebted to you."

It was not in the best of tempers that she parted from him on the doorstep; but she recovered herself before dinner-time, and she could not but acknowledge that his behaviour throughout the evening was exemplary. His contribution to the chorus of congratulation which greeted Matthew on the latter's return had the appearance of being as sincere as it was hearty; he had the good taste, too, to make no allusion, covert or otherwise, to the colloquy of which a part has been recorded above.

Nevertheless, there was now a secret—and a secret

which must be kept—between her and Leonard Jerome. That was why she felt that it would be impossible for her to remain much longer at Bannock Lodge, and that was also one reason why the steady, persistent rain of the morrow filled her with despondency. Some of the men were leaving that morning; the others proposed to shoot, notwithstanding the weather; only Leonard, who was still unwell, was peremptorily forbidden by his sister to accompany them.

“Whatever you do, don’t leave me!” Lilian whispered to Matthew, while plans were being discussed after breakfast. “Selfish I may be, but I decline to face a second whole day of Mr. Jerome. You must sacrifice yourself for once, and as soon as I can I shall get mamma out of this. It must be bad for her to be in such a cold, damp atmosphere. Indeed, she has begun to cough already.”

“Oh, we shall have the sun out again before nightfall, I dare say,” responded Matthew cheerfully. “Meanwhile, I ask for nothing better than to be allowed to stay in the house and try to amuse you. What would you like to do? Shall we have a game of billiards?”

Lilian assented; and although it subsequently proved necessary to include Madame d’Aultran and Leonard in the game, she was not dissatisfied. After all, what was there to be so much afraid of? Matthew, for his part, was evidently afraid of nothing, and she endeavoured to admire, instead of being irritated with, his calm belief in everybody.

Madame d’Aultran, puffing out cigarette smoke and giving utterance to occasional witticisms of a *risqué* character, did most of the talking. She played a neat game and, with Leonard for her partner, easily defeated the other couple. Every now and then excursions were made into the hall to tap the falling barometer and gaze out at the unbroken, leaden sky; once or twice Lady Bannock looked in to see how her guests were getting on, and to assure them audaciously that it never rained for twelve consecutive hours in the Highlands. But the

time dragged on very slowly, and Lilian was beginning to wonder how on earth the afternoon was to be disposed of, when a servant came in with some message for Matthew, who at once laid down his cue and left the room. As he had not returned at the end of five minutes, Madame d'Aultran shrugged her shoulders and remarked,—

“It is not ceremonious ; but the charm of your English country life is its absence of ceremony. What is certain is that three people cannot play billiards together—perhaps even cannot talk together with the freedom that two of them would prefer. *Allons ! je me sauve. Amusez-vous bien mes enfans, et tâchez d'être sages !*”

The horrid little woman disappeared through the doorway, with a parting grin, and for a moment Lilian thought of following her. But it seemed a little ridiculous to do that. From whom or from what was there any need for her to run away ? So she stood her ground and said coolly,—

“Shall we begin another game ? We can stop when Matthew comes back.”

Instead of making the reply that might have been expected of him, Leonard walked the whole length of the room and back again in silence. Then, halting in front of her, and looking straight into her eyes, he exclaimed abruptly,—

“Are you *sure* ?”

“I don't know what you mean,” faltered Lilian.

“Yes ; you know what I mean. Perhaps I ought not to say it ; perhaps it is treacherous to say it—although Heaven knows I have been loyal enough up to now ! Anyhow I can't help myself—I must ask you the question ! Are you sure that you really love Austin ? Are you sure that you have ever really loved him at all ?”

When, as sometimes happens, ordinary intercourse is stripped on a sudden of ordinary conventional restrictions, we are all apt to become amazingly honest. This, of course, is not because we have any wish to be so, but simply by reason of our inability to adapt ourselves at a moment's notice to novel and unforeseen conditions.

Lilian completely lost her presence of mind and answered,—

“If I were not sure, you are the very last person in the world to whom I should confess it.”

“Ah, then it is as I thought!” he cried. “You don’t love him; you only like and admire him—as indeed I do too, for the matter of that. But it isn’t enough to like and admire your husband, at least it can never be enough for *you*, and I am sure in your heart you feel that.”

Lilian, who had sunk down upon one of the long leather benches which surrounded the room, stared at him affrightedly. She seemed to have no answer to make; so he went on with the more confidence,—

“I am not ashamed of speaking like this——”

“You ought to be!” she interjected quickly.

“No; I should be ashamed of keeping silence. Ought I to let you wreck your whole life for an idea? I was going to say that I shouldn’t have ventured to speak as I am doing if you hadn’t betrayed yourself a dozen times in the course of the last two days. You may have deceived others, you may even, for aught I know, have deceived yourself; but it isn’t in your power to deceive a man who—well, it can do no harm to tell you what you know already—who loves you as passionately as I do.”

Lilian rose to her feet, not without an effort, and faced him unflinchingly.

“So this is what your friendship is worth,” said she; “this is what you boasted of and expected to be thanked for! I suppose it never occurred to you that I would rather have died than come here if I had imagined for one moment that your only object was to put such an insult upon me.”

“Ah, but I think you must be very well aware that that was not my object,” he returned quietly. “What had I to gain by insulting you, whom I love with all my heart and soul? When I asked my sister to invite you here and to invite Austin at the same time, I had no other wish than the very natural one to be put out of

my pain as soon as possible. Shall I tell you the whole truth? I was convinced that you loved him, but I was not at all convinced that he loved you. I thought—and indeed I think still—that he was fond of you in a sort of elder-brotherly way; I knew he would make the best of husbands; but I was sure that, partly out of chivalry and partly out of indifference, he would never attempt to force himself upon you, against your mother's wish. And I wanted you to have what would make you happy. It seems to me that that is a sufficient excuse for what I did."

Lilian's face had flushed and paled alternately during this speech. She now said,—

"You are not excusing yourself for what you have done, but for what you say that you meant to do. Oh, why could you not leave us alone!"

"I have told you," he answered. "I soon saw what the truth was, and that changed everything. I give you my word of honour that I would have held my tongue up to the end if I could have gone on believing that the love was on your side; but——"

"Oh, your honour!"

"Yes, my honour. I don't admit that I have acted dishonourably, though I know it will be said that I have. Austin is my friend; but, when it comes to be a question between Austin and you, he must go to the wall. I go further than that; I believe I am doing him an actual service by preventing you from marrying him on false pretences."

Lilian broke out into a hysterical laugh.

"You are very fortunate to be able to think so well of yourself," said she; "I wish you could give me your recipe! But you certainly go very far indeed when you take it for granted that you have prevented me from marrying the man to whom I am engaged. It is ingenious of you to suggest that he never cared for me; only I am not bound to believe that you are speaking the truth."

"I didn't say that he had never cared for you; I said

he had never really been in love with you. But that is nothing. What goes to the root of the whole matter is that you are not in love with him. Can you tell me that you are?"

Well, she tried to tell that falsehood—a falsehood which had been dear to her, which she had cherished, in spite of all, and which she had never until now admitted to be a falsehood—but her eyes dropped and the words refused to pass her lips. All she could say was, "What right have you to cross-examine me?"

He caught her by both hands, and, bending forward, murmured a few passionate words which explained what, in his opinion, constituted his right. Perhaps it was a right; perhaps it must be acknowledged to be a right; perhaps two unmarried people who love one another ought not to allow anything or any one to come between them. Yet it may be hoped that the majority of men would not have accepted Leonard Jerome's position as light-heartedly as he did.

"Don't be so troubled about it," he said, five minutes later; "it isn't nearly such a tragic business as you suppose. There will be a bad quarter of an hour for both of us; but that is a small price to pay for thirty or forty years of happiness instead of misery."

"Oh, you won't love me for thirty or forty years," Lilian returned, shaking her head sorrowfully; "if it is thirty or forty months of happiness that I am buying, that is the very outside. Besides, it isn't of myself, or of you either, that I am thinking."

"Well, you will see that Austin will take it coolly enough. It may be a shock to him, and I dare say it will; but I doubt whether he understands what love means. One feels like a brute; one can't help it—and yet all the time one knows that one isn't hurting him much."

"He does care for me," said Lilian.

"Yes; but not as *I* care for you—not as you wished to be cared for."

That might be true, and if so it was her one excuse. She said as much, adding,—

"I think he is too good for me ; I think I could have gone on loving him—because I did love him at first—if he hadn't always made me feel that he was such a long way above me. That objection doesn't apply to you," she concluded, with a faint smile.

"Oh, I'm not Matthew Austin," Leonard confessed readily ; "still I don't know that I am much worse than my neighbours. It is true that you have always treated me with apparent hatred and contempt ; but wasn't that only because——"

"Don't !" she exclaimed, laying her finger on his lips ; "you make me feel as if I had been acting a part which anybody could have seen through. But it was not pretence ; I really thought that I disliked and despised you. Even now I can't quite understand why you suspected what I never admitted to myself."

Leonard laughed.

"When one honestly despises a man, one doesn't take the trouble to keep on telling him so," he answered. "All the same, I felt nothing approaching to certainty until yesterday, nor any sort of hope that I should ever be as happy as I am now until a few minutes ago."

"You have no business to be happy," Lilian began. "I almost wish——"

But she started away from his side without ending her sentence ; for at this juncture the door was opened, and Matthew Austin walked in.

CHAPTER XXV.

TWO METHODS OF TREATING THE SITUATION.

IF Leonard and Lilian had looked half as guilty as they felt, or even half as guilty as they thought they were looking, explanations would have been entirely superfluous ; but, as a matter of fact, they only looked rather uncomfortable, and the intruder, glancing from the one to the other with an amused smile, suspected nothing more than that they had been quarrelling, as usual.

"I must apologize for having broken up our game so unceremoniously," said he as he advanced towards the window where they were standing ; "I thought I should only be away for a minute or so. Lady Sara merely sent to say that she wanted to speak to me, and I didn't gather from her message that anything was the matter."

"Is anything the matter? Has she been taken ill?" asked Lilian, making for the door at once.

Her own voice sounded most peculiar and unnatural to her ; but Matthew either noticed nothing odd about it or mistook the nature of her emotion. He stretched out his arm to bar her exit, and laughed.

"Don't be alarmed," said he ; "it is all right. I was afraid at first that there was a threatening of bronchitis, but I am quite satisfied now that a slight cold is the extent of the mischief. As a measure of extra precaution I have sentenced your mother to twenty-four hours of imprisonment in one room, and I should have been downstairs again long before this, only we began talking, so that the time slipped away. What have you done with Madame d'Aultran? I am afraid she won't be best pleased with me for having deserted her in that cavalier manner."

"I—I think you will find her in the drawing-room.

Or if she isn't there, perhaps she will be—somewhere else," answered Lilian desperately; for indeed the girl hardly knew what she was saying, and her one wish at the moment was to get away and hide herself.

"Oh, my anxiety to make my peace with Madame d'Aultran is not so keen as all that," said Matthew; "I would rather be allowed to stay where I am for the present, if I am not *de trop*."

"Not at all," answered Lilian—and then was so struck by the absurd ineptitude of the reply that she broke into an abrupt fit of laughter.

Matthew looked a little puzzled; Leonard, who had taken up a cue and was knocking the balls about, paused to stare at her across the billiard-table in mingled amazement and apprehension. She felt that she could endure this no longer, and that her sole chance of saving the situation lay in precipitate flight. Murmuring something about her mother, therefore, she turned, and was out of the room before another word could be said. The unsuspecting Matthew thought it necessary to offer excuses on her behalf.

"Lilian isn't quite herself," he remarked. "She has had a good deal to try her during the last few days, you know, and of course—as Lady Sara was saying to me just now—I am not the husband whom her friends would have selected for her. Women, I fancy, feel the disdain and compassion of their female friends a great deal more than we should. That sort of thing gets on their nerves and irritates them, however determined they may be to disregard it."

"I dare say it does," agreed Leonard absently.

He was driving a ball round the billiard-table, and was apparently intent upon making it strike as many cushions as he could; but in reality he was not conscious of any such effort. What he was thinking to himself was that if the payment of a hundred pounds, or even five hundred, could make him just half an hour older, he would write an I.O.U. for the amount then and there without wincing. It had been all very well to assure Lilian that the

business was not a tragic one, but now that he was face to face with it he did not like it in the least. If Austin would only make things a little easier for a fellow by asking one of the questions which might so naturally have been asked under the circumstances! But Matthew, with no inkling of what was required of him, was proceeding innocently,—

“Yes, it makes them irritable; and then the person nearest at hand is apt to suffer. I want you to be friends, you two, and I am sure you will be friends by-and-by; only for the present there are certain obstacles. You see, my dear Jerome, the fact is that it isn’t altogether easy for a beautiful girl to treat a good-looking young bachelor like you as a friend. Her experience is that all young men want to make love to her, and even if she knows that it is not so in a particular instance, she can’t help knowing what other people are likely to think and say about it. For the matter of that,” added Matthew, laughing, “I don’t mind telling you that Madame d’Aultran has been kind enough to caution me repeatedly against leaving you and Lilian together.”

Leonard laid down his cue, straightened his back, and returned curtly,—

“Madame d’Aultran is no fool!”

“There are fools and fools. I take the liberty of calling her a fool for not having discovered that I can trust you as implicitly as I would trust myself; but as to the general principle she is probably right, and Lilian may feel that. What I mean is that Lilian can’t be quite at her ease with you yet; so if she has been snubbing you, and if you and she have had a little tiff in consequence——”

“Oh, man alive!” groaned Leonard, “there has been no little tiff. *Can’t* you understand?—have you really and truly seen nothing all this time?”

Matthew’s face became grave. He laid his hand gently upon the other’s shoulder and said,—

“Perhaps I haven’t been quite as blind as you think. Long ago at Wilverton I fancied that you were rather smitten; I told you so, you know, and you almost ad-

mitted it. But you gave me to understand that that kind of malady wasn't incurable with you—and then you went away. Ever since you have seemed anxious—unnaturally anxious, I dare say—to make my path smooth for me. I ought to have understood the meaning of that unnatural anxiety; most likely I should have understood it if I had been a spectator, instead of an actor; the only excuse for my density is that there was no very obvious reason why, if you loved Lilian, you should not have paid your addresses to her as others did. I am afraid the reason must have been that you were my friend and that you were determined not to be a false friend."

"Yes, that was it—upon my honour, that was it!" responded Leonard eagerly. "And after all," he added, with a mournful change of intonation, "I *have* been a false friend. I don't suppose you will ever forgive me."

"My dear fellow, if you have said something which it would have been better not to say, I forgive you with all my heart," Matthew declared. "And I am most truly sorry for this. What can I say?" he added, throwing his arms apart with a gesture of deprecation which was almost comic. "It is a standing marvel to me that Lilian should have chosen me rather than you, or somebody like you; but since she has chosen me—since she does love me——"

"But she doesn't!" interrupted Leonard.

It was a brutal method of opening his friend's eyes; yet the thing evidently could not be accomplished without brutality, and this dialogue at cross-purposes was growing intolerable.

"Believe me or not, as you like," he went on, "I wouldn't have raised a finger to prevent your marriage unless I had seen as plainly as I see you now that she was deceiving you. From the very best motives, of course; still the fact remained that she was deceiving you. For a long time I firmly believed that she cared for you—there would have been nothing in the least extraordinary

in it if she had—but of late it has been different. The true state of the case couldn't be ignored any longer."

Matthew's grey eyes sometimes assumed a singularly intent, searching expression. At such moments they darkened in colour and could not be met without a sensation of discomfort. Leonard's fell before them, as he said,—

"I know you must hate me—I hate myself for hurting you like this! But it was inevitable."

"I think," rejoined Matthew quietly, "that you are mistaken. That is, if you are under the impression that Lilian not only does not love me, but that she loves you."

"There cannot be any mistake about the matter; I have her own word for it that she loves me, and if you will ask her—but I don't want you to go to her in hot blood. See here, Austin; we have both treated you abominably, and we are heartily ashamed of ourselves; but in a sort of way we have been the victims of circumstances, just as you have. I don't ask to be forgiven—that would be asking rather too much—only I do beg of you to spare Lilian until you have had a few hours to think it all over in."

"Do I strike you as behaving like a man in hot blood?" asked Matthew with just a touch of scorn. "And don't you think that, if I wished to vent my wrath upon somebody, I should prefer attacking you to attacking a woman? Indeed, that would be all the more easy because, although I cannot profess to understand her, I believe I thoroughly understand you now."

Those were the sole words of reproach that he addressed to his friend and supplanter from first to last. He listened patiently to Leonard's explanatory narrative; he submitted, much more in compassion than in anger, to the latter's protestations of remorse and somewhat lame efforts at self-justification; he bore even to be assured that his own love for Lilian Murray had been a sheer illusion, at the memory of which he would soon learn to smile. He did, in truth, thoroughly understand his interlocutor, and recognized that Leonard Jerome, being

what he was, could scarcely have acted or spoken otherwise than as he had done. The manner in which the conversation was wound up was highly characteristic of both men.

"Well, that's a great weight off my mind!" Leonard exclaimed. "I never funk'd anything so much in my life; but it hasn't been half as bad as I expected, and you're awfully good about it. It's jolly to think that I may still call you my friend; for, when all's said and done, you are the very best friend I have in the world, Austin."

"I shouldn't wonder if I was," Matthew answered, holding out his hand and smiling. "Anyhow, this long misunderstanding, which has come to an end at last, shall cause no breach between us."

But if it was easy to understand Leonard and not very difficult to make excuses for him, Lilian's case stood upon quite another footing. Generous though Matthew was, and had proved himself to be, he could find no extenuating circumstance for her amongst those of which she was said to have been the victim. For what object or reason, he wondered, as he left the billiard-room with an aching heart, had she been guilty of such deliberate and sustained duplicity? Inconstancy would have been a little thing—he had never demanded of her that she should remain faithful to a pledge by which she had bound herself against his express wish, nor would he have had any right to feel aggrieved had she claimed her release from it. But that she should have said what she had said and done what she had done, loving another man the whole time—this it was that he could neither comprehend nor condone. Frankly, there is something revolting in such behaviour, and no lover, however versed he may be in the intricate and contradictory workings of human nature, can be expected to palliate it.

Of that Lilian was only too well aware. She might, had she been less straightforward, or had she taken a less uncompromising view of her own moral degradation, have made out a case for herself; she might, indeed, by

telling the simple truth, have conciliated the man whose confidence she had betrayed and who was large-minded enough to pardon any truth-telling fellow-sinner ; but it did not seem to her worth while to attempt anything of the kind. She belonged, as it happened, to that somewhat scarce class of mortals who are either good or bad, their temperament forbidding them to detect the comfortable *via media* which renders existence more or less pleasant for the generality of us. Consequently, she had nothing to say to Matthew that did not constitute an aggravation of her offence.

Her non-appearance at the luncheon hour created no remark. Madame d'Aultran, to be sure, seemed to smell a rat and threw out some broad hints ; but neither Leonard nor Matthew suffered themselves to be disconcerted by these, and immediately after rising from the table, the latter went upstairs, saying that he must see how his patient was getting on. He found his patient cheerful and in evident ignorance of the events of the morning. Lilian, who was seated beside her, looked rather paler than usual, but exhibited no agitation and took her share in the conversation that followed with a composure which Matthew would have admired if it had not disgusted him. He avoided addressing her directly—in fact, he could not bring himself to do so—until the time came for him to retire, when he turned to her and said,—

“ May I speak to you for a minute ? ”

She got up at once and followed him out on to the landing at the top of the staircase. From the hall below arose the shrill voice of Madame d'Aultran, who, as could be gathered from her ejaculations, was throwing cherries at Leonard Jerome and making him catch them in his mouth.

“ Is this sufficiently private,” asked Lilian, “ or shall I get a hat and a waterproof and go out of doors with you ? I don't mind getting my feet wet.”

“ There is no need for that, thank you,” answered Matthew coldly. “ Something must be said ; but I suppose the sooner it is over the better you will be pleased ? ”

She nodded and waited calmly for him to continue.

That, after all, was not the easiest thing in the world to do, and a few seconds of silence supervened, during which he tried to collect his ideas and imitate her calmness.

"Of course," he began at length, "you are released from your engagement to me."

"That," she remarked, "goes without saying. I never yet heard of a man who wished to keep up his engagement after he had been thrown over, and I don't quite see how he could do it, even if he had such an extraordinary wish."

"I am sorry that I expressed myself so ridiculously; the situation is rather novel and rather sudden, you see. I suppose what I meant to say was that, so far as I am concerned, you will have no further trouble."

"I didn't expect any," answered Lilian. "You are well rid of me, and you know it. Is there any use in my begging your pardon? I will, if you choose; only I can't imagine that you would care about apologies. Nothing can alter the facts."

Matthew dropped his elbows upon the balustrade and looked down the staircase without replying. Piercing shrieks of laughter ascended from beneath him, where Madame d'Aultran had apparently grown weary of the cherry game and was now chasing her victim round and round the hall. Presently the slamming of the front door was followed by silence. It was to be presumed that Leonard had preferred the fury of the elements to the refined pleasantries of the Vicomtesse. Lilian advanced a few steps and tapped her discarded lover somewhat sharply upon the shoulder.

"Don't look so woebegone," she said; "you must know as well as I do that you have no cause for lamentation. You have found me out. Well, that isn't pleasant; but it would have been a good deal more unpleasant to find me out after you had married me, wouldn't it? You ought to be thanking Heaven for your good fortune—and so you will be very soon."

He turned a haggard and frowning countenance upon her.

"I can't believe that it is you who are speaking to me, Lilian," he exclaimed. "Why have you misled me so completely? What was the good of it?—where was the need for it? I don't recognize you."

"How should you, when I don't recognize myself?" she retorted, with a short laugh. "No, I won't say that! This is my real self; the other wasn't. I am sure mamma will tell you—she is fond enough of telling me—that we are a bad lot and that we can't escape from the taint of our race. You can put it in that way if you find me too puzzling. But, after all, what does it signify?"

"Not very much, perhaps," answered Matthew, after a pause, "so long as you are quite certain that you love Jerome."

"I suppose I must have been quite certain of that some time ago, though I didn't acknowledge it, and I tried to do what seemed to be my duty. If you had come to me in London when I begged you to come—but we won't go back to that old story. One thing at least I am quite certain of now, and that is that you are to be congratulated." As he made no response, she resumed presently, "What will you do? You won't stay on here, I presume."

"Oh no," he answered, "I shall make some excuse for leaving to-morrow morning. Perhaps it would be less embarrassing both for you and for me if nothing were said about all this until after my departure."

"Just as you like."

"Thank you; then I should like to be unexpectedly called away. And now, just one word more. I have told Jerome that there shall be no breach between us and that we shall be friends in the future as we have been in the past. I don't know whether I may venture to say as much to you?"

"I don't see how you can. You are well rid of me; but if you were an angel from heaven, that wouldn't

prevent you from despising me. It is downright nonsense to talk about our remaining friends."

"Well, I shall be your husband's friend, at any rate, and we are sure to meet after your marriage, because Mr. Litton will want you to stay at Wilverton Grange sometimes. I think it would be better for everybody concerned that we should meet upon friendly terms."

"Oh, of course!—I didn't quite understand what you meant. By all means let us behave civilly to one another. Is that all?"

"I believe that is all," answered Matthew, turning to descend the stairs. But on the first step he halted and retraced his steps. "Lilian," he said, "do you know that you have been talking to me all this time as if I were in the wrong? Will you tell me whether I have done anything to hurt or offend you?"

"Oh, I don't know!" she returned impatiently. "Don't call me Lilian again, please; I am Miss Murray now, and you are Mr. Austin. No, you haven't offended me; once or twice you might have been a little more sympathetic—but it's lucky that you weren't. I am glad that you are not much hurt, and only as much offended as you couldn't help being. Now go—go and marry Miss Frere, and be happy ever afterwards!"

The sound of her forced and mocking laughter pursued him down to the hall, where he found a batch of letters awaiting him. It was a simple matter to seek out Lady Bannock, holding these in his hand, and to tell her that he found himself, much to his regret, compelled to leave Scotland early on the morrow; but to baffle the curiosity and the shrewd suspicions of Madame d'Aultran proved a somewhat harder task.

"I have a great mind to travel south with you," the horrible little woman said, when he wished her good-night, after having been goaded almost to the point of insulting her throughout a long evening. "Our little comedy has been played to the end now, has it not?"

"If you do," answered Matthew, turning upon her at last in despair, "you will have to travel in a third-class

smoking-carriage, and you will have a most disagreeable companion ; for I make it a rule never to speak to any one in the train."

She shrugged her shoulders and made a grimace at him.

" *Au fait*," she remarked, " you are not a very brilliant companion at the best of times. Perhaps I will wait another day or two, then, and see the last act. You do well to retire ; for, frankly, you have not played your part skilfully enough to be called before the curtain."

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE REPAYMENT OF A LOAN.

EVERYBODY who has passed beyond the period of extreme youth must have been brought face to face with the difficulty of applying general and accurate theories to cases of personal experience. Matthew Austin knew as well as anybody that the human race is inconsistent and perverse, that the female division of the species is more especially so, and that the callousness which Lilian had seen fit to affect during their parting interview ought rather to be taken as evidence of sorrow and remorse than of indifference. He knew this, and he would have been the first to point out so patent a fact to any other unfortunate circumstanced as he was; yet, since it was he himself who had been made to suffer, he tried in vain to forgive her. It was all very fine to say *nemo repente fuit turpissimus*, it was all very fine to assert that the girl whom he had loved was too proud to plead for pardon and had represented herself as being worse than she really was out of sheer self-contempt; but, as she herself had remarked, nothing could alter the facts, nor is it within the range of any ordinary philosopher's capacity to diagnose impartially the character of a fellow-creature who has just struck him across the face with a cutting whip.

So Lilian attained her object, which—as the discriminating reader will doubtless have surmised—was to expedite the healing of Matthew's wounds by means of cautery. A physician and surgeon so skilled as the man whom she had jilted could have told her that the process is a risky one; still, there is no denying that in his own case it was attended with a certain measure of success. Sore though he was, and thrown off his mental

balance by treatment for which he had been utterly unprepared, he was nevertheless spared pangs which he could not have escaped had he retained his former opinion of her. "I am shamed through all my nature to have loved so slight a thing!" bawls the stentorian martyr of "Locksley Hall." Matthew did not use quite such strong language as that; but he certainly did feel, after he had returned to Wilverton and had spent a few days in the solitude of his own house, that his love for Lilian Murray had been effectually killed. The soreness, to be sure, remained, and was likely to remain for a long time to come; but his grief was not what it would have been if she had treated him with greater gentleness, or if the discovery that her heart belonged to Leonard Jerome had dawned upon him more gradually.

He was even able to laugh a little over the letters which pursued him from the north. Through Lady Sara's apologies and condolences, which were profuse, there ran an evident undercurrent of apprehension lest she should lose the services of the only doctor in whom she felt any confidence.

"*Really and truly,*" she wrote, "it is not I who am to blame. I warned you, if you remember, that I had lost all control over Lilian, and at the time when I said that to you, I was more than half afraid that she was meditating some such *coup de tête* as this. I can't tell you how vexed I am! It seems as if every member of our family, except myself, had an irresistible craving to do scandalous and uncalled-for things! Personally, I have never encouraged Mr. Jerome in any way, and of course the match is far from being a brilliant one. He says he has expectations from that old uncle of his—one can only trust they may be verified!—and he says also that you have most nobly and generously assured him that this shall make no difference in your friendship for him. I hardly dare to hope that it will make none in your friendship for me."

Lady Bannock's disclaimer of responsibility and expressions of regret were accompanied by similar depre-

catory comments upon the match that her brother was about to make. Leonard, in her opinion, might have done a very great deal better; she sincerely repented of having asked the Murrays to stay with her; "and although, of course, there is nothing to be done now but to put a good face upon it, I can't help feeling very angry with them all. You, I am afraid, must be simply furious, and indeed you have been shamefully treated. The only comforting thing that I can think of to say to you is that that girl would never have settled down to a quiet, humdrum existence. And that, as you may imagine, isn't a particularly comforting reflection to *me*!"

Leonard himself wrote in the highest spirits and with scarcely a trace of penitence.

"I'll tell you what I am going to do," was his concluding statement; "I am going to get you to act as best man on my wedding-day. That, I should hope, will convince everybody that there is no ill-feeling."

Finally, there were a few kindly-meant lines from Colonel Standish.

"Never you mind, my dear sir; those laugh longest who laugh last, and you are not the person most to be pitied in this business, take my word for it. Keep your weather-eye open, and you will see things before you reach my age which will make you thank your stars that you didn't get what you wanted. Stick to shooting. There's nothing like it—not even hunting."

The recipient of the above missives returned suitable replies to each and all of them. In times of tribulation friends at a distance can, as a rule, be suitably dealt with; but it is a somewhat harder matter to endure the *vivâ voce* examination of friends on the spot, and from these Matthew was not exempted. Mrs. Jennings, it is needless to say, knew that he had been to Bannock Lodge, knew whom he had gone thither to meet, and was so persistent in her demands for categorical information that it seemed the best and shortest plan to conceal nothing from her. By this means he was at least saved from any necessity for informing other neighbours of his discomfi-

ture, though he could not escape their sympathy and commiseration. Most of them were genuinely sorry for him and genuinely indignant against the faithless Miss Murray; he had to let them speak their minds freely and bear with the compassion which they lavished upon him. Only Mrs. Frere, who, notwithstanding her habitual frankness of speech, was a well-bred woman and had instincts which are not to be acquired, earned his gratitude by taking everything for granted and asking no questions.

He met her in the town one afternoon, and she cut short the announcement upon which he felt bound to embark by saying briskly,—

“Oh yes; so somebody was telling me the other day. What a handsome couple they will make! I suppose you couldn’t drive home with me and see George, could you? He is in a great state of mind because he is sure that he is upon the brink of a fit of gout, and we have asked a few men to come to us for the partridge-shooting, which is to be better than usual this year, I believe. By the way, how did you get on with the grouse in Scotland?”

Matthew thanked her with his eyes and at once seated himself beside her in the carriage. On the way to Hayes Park he narrated his exploits on the moors, and received in return a discursive *résumé* of what had taken place in the neighbourhood of Wilverton during his absence.

“We ourselves have been having some bothers,” Mrs. Frere remarked with a sigh; “but we are at the end of them now, I hope, and, as I always tell George, bygone bothers are much best forgotten. It’s the future bothers that are so difficult to keep out of sight—although nothing is ever so bad as one thinks it is going to be, and things generally end by arranging themselves.”

“Oh yes; and fifty short years hence we shall have reached the land where all bothers are forgotten,” agreed Matthew, laughing.

Mrs. Frere had been so considerate with him that the least he could do was to return the compliment. He did

not, therefore, invite her to particularize ; but he thought it more than likely that Spencer had been giving trouble. This surmise received confirmation when he had been ushered into Mr. Frere's so-called study and had prescribed remedies for that choleric old gentleman, whose temper appeared to be in a worse condition than his bodily health.

" Oh, you may say there isn't much the matter with me," grumbled his patient ; " but the truth is that there's a deuce of a lot the matter with me ! Only my complaint is out of your sphere, I suppose. At least I have never yet met with a doctor who was acquainted with any cure for chronic worry."

" A pennyworth of patience ? " Matthew suggested.

" H'm ! do you keep that in stock ? You must have a superabundance of it by the look of you. What you fellows are made of now, I can't understand ! In my young days we shouldn't have stood looking on while another man walked coolly off with the girl we were engaged to. Well, there ! I beg your pardon, Austin ; I didn't mean to say that. I dare say you are quite right, and, by all accounts, you have behaved most magnanimously ; only I haven't your calm temperament, you see. Besides which, I can't help thinking that my troubles are a bit worse than yours. You may remember my speaking to you once about my eldest son. Well, he has been here, and the women have been trying to patch up a reconciliation—of course without success. I'm not to blame, and I tell them I don't care a hang ; still, that kind of thing does worry a man, and worry means gout. Don't you know it does ? "

" Very often," assented Matthew.

He felt rather uncomfortable, wondering whether Spencer had betrayed him and not venturing to inquire ; but no additional information was vouchsafed by Mr. Frere, who began to talk about the disappointing harvest and the prospect of a still further reduction in already diminished rents. It was not until he rose to take his leave that the old gentleman said hurriedly,—

"I'll tell you what I wish you would do for me, Austin; I wish you would just find an opportunity of representing to Anne that I'm not the unnatural father she takes me for. I can't reinstate my son—knowing what he is, I simply daren't—and nothing short of reinstatement would do. If you could get her to understand that I should be obliged to you. I would have said it to her myself, only one has to be so cautious with women! The moment they think you are yielding they lose all fear of you and begin trying to drive you into a corner."

Matthew willingly undertook this commission, for the speedy execution of which every facility was afforded him; for as he left the house, there was Anne, pacing slowly to and fro outside and obviously waiting for him.

"I have something to give you," she began almost before they had finished exchanging greetings, and she thrust a slip of paper into his hand as she spoke. "It is the money that you advanced to Spencer," she explained. "I am so thankful that he is able to repay you now!—and so is he. And I want to say, too, how sorry I am for having behaved so horridly to you that afternoon at the garden-party. But perhaps you made allowances—perhaps you understood what a humiliating position it was to be placed in?"

Matthew nodded, and glanced at the cheque, which was signed "Spencer Frere." Spencer Frere with a banking account! He could not help elevating his eyebrows and glancing interrogatively at Anne, who reddened slightly.

"I thought my father might have told you," she said.

"He told me that your brother had been here," Matthew answered. "He didn't say much more; but he seemed to be distressed at the idea of having distressed you, and I think he wants you to believe that he is only irreconcilable because he can't help it."

"Perhaps he can't help it," Anne assented despondently. "I wish some sort of arrangement could have been come to, but I quite see that it would have been out of the question to forgive and forget. Spencer's

wife is too impossible, unfortunately ! You haven't heard of Spencer's marriage, then ? ”

“ Not a word. Has he really married that Mrs. Johnson ? ”

“ Well, she has married him. She seems to have bought his discharge and led him straight off to church. I can't quite make out whether she cares for him or not ; but I hope she does, because my father's refusal to have anything to do with them has been a terrible disappointment to her, poor woman ! She says she has been cruelly deceived. Perhaps she has ; although Spencer declares that he warned her how it would be. ”

“ She might be acknowledged, one would think. Is she so appallingly vulgar ? ”

“ She is very common ; she dresses loudly and paints her face and speaks of men by their surnames, without any prefix. I am afraid the utmost that could be done would be to have them here for a short visit now and then. But what my father seems to feel most of all is that Spencer hasn't changed. He does not know of that disgraceful business or of how much indebted we all are to you—— ”

“ Well, I am glad of that anyhow ! ” interpolated Matthew.

“ Yes ; I knew you would not wish him to hear ; it was as much for your sake as for my own that I kept the secret. But he says what I suppose is the truth, that Spencer only married in order to be comfortably provided for, and he told Arabella plainly that, since she had chosen to pay a heavy price for the chance of being Mrs. Frere of Hayes Park some day, she had nobody but herself to blame for the failure of her speculation. ”

“ I am rather sorry for poor Arabella, ” remarked Matthew, with a smile. “ As for your brother, he appears to have fallen upon his feet. Are they well off ? ”

“ Yes ; so far as income is concerned, I believe they are. But I am afraid she is allowing him to have more control over her money than he ought to have, and they were already beginning to quarrel. Naturally enough she went away in a great rage, and he would only laugh

at her. I doubt whether I shall ever see him again," Anne added sorrowfully.

It really could not be considered very desirable that she ever should; but Matthew was not so unfeeling as to speak out his thoughts. He contented himself with observing that, although material comfort is not everything, it is the best thing that can be looked for in the case of certain individuals, and that Spencer Frere had been scarcely one of those private soldiers in whose personal kit a field-marshal's baton is likely to lie concealed. For the rest, he ordered his remarks with that tact which is more often the result of kind-heartedness than of deliberate intention, and, as he walked slowly across the park with his companion, he was glad to notice that he was giving her some comfort. When they came within sight of the lodge she stood still and said, rather abruptly and awkwardly, it must be owned,—

"Mr. Austin, I can't let you go without telling you how very sorry I was to hear of your——"

"My disappointment?" suggested Matthew.

"Yes, if that is the right word to use. You know how stupid I am—I never can say things as they ought to be said—but I *should* like to see that Mr. Jerome soundly horsewhipped!"

"I am sure you wouldn't," returned Matthew, laughing; "that would be a most unpleasant sight. Added to which, he doesn't deserve it."

"Oh, he *does* deserve it! There might have been some excuse for him if he had not pretended to be so devoted to you, and if he had not invited you to stay with his sister; but to behave as he has done while you were actually his guest—well, I suppose I have no great reason to be proud of Spencer, but I don't believe Spencer would ever have been guilty of such meanness as that!"

"It sounds worse than it really was," Matthew said. "When Jerome asked me to Scotland he had no more suspicion than I had of what was going to happen. What did happen was probably inevitable, and, however that may be, I have no grudge against him."

Anne coloured: she was a little ashamed of having displayed so much warmth, and a little mortified by what sounded very like a rebuff.

"Of course, if you are satisfied, there is nothing more to be said," she remarked.

"I don't pretend to be satisfied, in the sense of being contented; but I bear no malice against Jerome. He didn't pit himself against me deliberately; but from the moment that he was forced to do so he couldn't help winning. Life is nothing but a big game, in which the best players are sure to be victorious. If the vanquished can't take their beating good-humouredly they are not fit to play at all."

"I thought it was an essential condition of all games that the play should be fair," said Anne. "I must keep my opinion of Mr. Jerome; but I will keep it to myself for the future, and I beg your pardon for having been so impertinent as to allude to the subject."

"Please don't say that! You make me feel as if I had rejected your sympathy; whereas Heaven knows I am only too grateful to anybody who refrains from laughing at me! But I want to be sane and reasonable about the whole thing if I can; and I suppose the truth is that I was neither the one nor the other when I imagined that a girl like Miss Murray could live happily as the wife of a country doctor. The long and the short of it is that I understand my own sex a good deal better than I do yours: you may have noticed that."

Anne could not help smiling, though she was still vaguely displeased with him.

"Yes," she answered, "you have given me one or two opportunities of noticing that. But," she added, after a rather prolonged pause, "there is one member of your own sex about whom you know nothing at all—namely, yourself. When you discover what you really are—but I don't believe you ever will—you will begin to see what a worthless and thankless lot the rest of us must be."

CHAPTER XXVII.

A BRACING EXPERIENCE.

"You are a French scholar, I believe, Austin," said Mr. Litton one wet, stormy afternoon in October. Can you oblige me with an English equivalent for the word *saugrenu*?"

The old man was pacing up and down his thickly-carpeted library, the warmth and comfort of which contrasted agreeably with the wild weather outside. He paused in front of the table where Matthew was seated, taking notes from an open folio volume, and awaited a reply, his thick grey eyebrows drawn down over his twinkling eyes.

"I'm afraid I can't," Matthew confessed, looking up. "The dictionaries would give you 'foolish' or 'absurd,' or something of that sort, I suppose."

"The dictionaries are very apt to give foolish and absurd translations. No; I am afraid we cannot match *saugrenu* in our tongue; and that is annoying, because one sometimes wants to make use of the word. I want rather badly to apply it to your conduct just now, for instance."

"Thank you; but why?" Matthew inquired.

"Well, chiefly because it is not to be described by any other adjective, but partly because I have a lingering hope that you may still be saved from deserving it. You have been jilted, and you choose to embrace the man who has cut you out. I don't myself see the necessity for doing so; yet I am willing to admit that, since public opinion won't allow you to shoot him or thrash

him, there is a certain air of chivalry about shaking hands and letting bygones be bygones. But when it comes to attending that man to the altar, and looking on benevolently while he is married to the woman who has jilted you, I must own that you altogether exceed the limits of my comprehension and sympathy."

"But he has set his heart upon it," Matthew said, "and he would probably be hurt if I refused. After all, what does it matter?"

"Well, well! But he isn't so easily hurt as all that; and I presume you are not particularly anxious to be made the laughing-stock of a whole pack of fools."

"I don't think I particularly mind," answered Matthew. "Besides, I dare say they won't laugh."

"Oh, they will laugh—laugh from ear to ear. Old Jennings was here this morning, and he would have been a good deal more impertinent about it than he was if I hadn't turned upon him and made him lick the ground. That nephew of mine has twenty times the impudence of Jennings, or he never would have dared to make such a request to you."

"He doesn't look at it in that way; he thinks he is giving me a proof of sincere friendship. And I am not at all sure that he isn't."

Mr. Litton moved away, with an impatient ejaculation, towards one of the windows, where he stood for a while watching the driving rain and the tossing boughs of the trees. Then he faced about and said,—

"One has a sort of disrespectful admiration for you, Austin."

"Well, that is something," remarked Matthew good-humouredly.

"It isn't much; but it's the most you will get from me until you learn to discriminate. Magnanimity is a fine quality in the abstract, but it loses its attractiveness when it is misapplied. Leonard, as I have told you again and again, and as you will find out some day, is a useless, selfish, ungrateful fellow. You can't afford to be magnanimous with people of his kind; they will

always either think you are afraid of them or else flatter themselves that they are so fascinating as to be irresistible. They won't give *you* any credit, take my word for it."

"I believe Leonard will give me credit for wishing to please him," Matthew answered, "and that is really all I care about."

"Ah! there is where you are admirable. You honestly don't care whether your motives are appreciated or not, and you honestly don't object to being written down an ass. Well, as I said before, some of your flights take you a little beyond the reach of my understanding or fellow-feeling. Nobody shall call me an ass if I can help it, nor shall anybody have a plausible excuse for thinking me one. I take it that I should be an ass of the most pronounced type if I were to provide Leonard with an increased income on his marriage, and if he expects anything of the sort he will be disappointed."

"But does he expect it?" Matthew asked.

"I don't know," answered the other dryly, after throwing a quick, half-suspicious glance at his questioner; "I know he won't get it."

These two men had become friends, in so far as the great difference between their respective ages and characters rendered friendship possible. Mr. Litton had a liking for Matthew which was almost love, and was tempered only by something akin to contempt for the dreamy young physician's detached attitude towards life as a whole; while Matthew, recognizing what was great and what was small in the temperament of the lonely old fellow with whom fortune had dealt so ironically, enjoyed his occasional visits to Wilverton Grange, notwithstanding the petulance with which he was as often as not received there. Mr. Litton was afflicted with the sensitiveness of a cripple and the universal distrust bred of riches and the absence of any heir of entail. He had neither objected to nor approved of his nephew's engagement to Lilian Murray, saying and writing that he had no voice in the matter, and that, so far as he was

concerned, Leonard had nothing to do but to please himself; but his privately-expressed opinion of the latter's conduct had been scarcely less emphatic than Anne Frere's, and he curtly declined to go up to London for the wedding.

The wedding, it had now been decided, was to take place at St. Paul's, Knightsbridge, early in December; that Matthew had been prevailed upon to play a leading part on the occasion will have been gathered from the above fragment of dialogue. Why he should have been asked to do so was a puzzle to many people besides Mr. Litton—to Lady Sara and to Lilian amongst the number—but he himself entered into Leonard's feeling, and was touched rather than repelled by it. Leonard, he knew, was fond of him; Leonard was a little ashamed and very anxious to give convincing proof to all the world that his friend was his friend still. Nothing could be more natural or more *naïf*, nor did it seem worth while to refuse a request which, to tell the truth, could not be granted without some slight sacrifice of personal comfort and self-respect.

"Of one thing, at least, I am sure," was Mr. Litton's parting remark, "and I am glad to be sure of it: you never can have been in love with that girl. If you had been, I would defy even you to place yourself in such a preposterous position."

Well, that might be true. Matthew thought of it as he drove rapidly away in his dog-cart to visit patients, of whom he had once more as many as he could manage, and he said to himself that it might be true. Anyhow, the Lilian whom he had loved no longer existed; it was quite another person who was going to marry Leonard Jerome, with his best wishes for their joint and several happiness. As for his own happiness, he believed that a fair average share of that was assured to him. Scarcely any man, if indeed any man, gets exactly what he wants; but so long as he has plenty of work to do, and likes his work, he had better not grumble. Moreover, there always remained the garden

and the greenhouses. "Which is better than Colonel Standish's shooting," Matthew reflected, "because there is no close time for plants."

Yet for all his courage and all his self-abnegation, that autumn was a dreary season for him. The exigencies of a rapidly-developing practice left him little leisure for brooding during the daytime; but five or six hours out of the twenty-four had to be spent in bed, and when he went to bed he could not always contrive to go to sleep. Then it was that the future loomed dark and solitary before him; then it was that the past looked fantastically unreal and the present barely endurable; then, too, it was that he pronounced certain judgments upon womankind in general which in brighter moments he would have hastened to repudiate. If only those interminable November days and nights would pass! There were thirty of them to be lived through, as well as a few at the beginning of December to be added to their number; and at the risk of causing readers to laugh from ear to ear, like Dr. Jennings, it has to be avowed that Matthew at this time kept a little schoolboy's calendar, erasing a date from it every evening before he retired to rest, and contemplating, with a diurnal sigh of relief, the slowly-descending array of black strokes. "When once it is over and done with, I shall be all right," he was wont to assure himself.

The sun, meanwhile, continued to rise and set with monotonous regularity, and if there was no sunshine in London when Matthew at length stepped out upon the platform at the terminus, the electric light sufficed to render the features of the fur-coated gentleman who was awaiting his arrival recognizable.

"I had to come and meet you after getting your telegram," Leonard said, wringing his hand cordially. "Nonsense about your going to a hotel! I've been there and countermanded your room. You are to make yourself at home in my humble diggings, please. As soon as you have washed the blacks off and changed your clothes we'll go round to the club and have some

dinner. Well, and how are you, old man? You're looking very fit."

Matthew was glad to hear that, because he had no desire to look as wretched as he felt. He submitted without useless demur to the arrangements made by his companion, and was soon being whirled off westwards in a hansom towards the latter's abode, Leonard, who was in exuberant spirits, talking the whole time.

In truth this meeting between two former friends had none of the embarrassment which might have been expected to attend it. Leonard really seemed to have forgotten all that it was convenient to forget, and spoke as unreservedly of the morrow's ceremony and of plans for the future as if there had never been any thought of love-passages between the bride-elect and his patient hearer. Matthew learnt from him that the young couple were to spend their honeymoon in Italy—"Rather a *bourgeois* sort of thing to do," the expectant bridegroom remarked, "but there seemed to be no alternative"—and that they were eventually to take up their residence at Stanwick Hall, Leonard's place in Northumberland, which had lately been vacated by his tenants and was about to be refurbished for the reception of its owner. There was not too much money available for the refurbishing process, Leonard avowed with a laugh and a grimace.

"I had a faint hope," he said, "that Uncle Richard might come down handsomely upon the occasion; but he doesn't seem to see his duty in that light. He has presented Lilian with a diamond necklace, and he has sent me a cheque for five hundred—which, I suspect, is about as much as we shall get out of him until it pleases Heaven to call him to his long home. What a lot these rich old beggars lose by clinging to money which they can't spend! When I step into my revered uncle's shoes I shall make a point of allowing some poor devil a thousand a year. Talk about the virtue of making other people happy! Why, there's no luxury

to compare with it! *You* ought to know that, if anybody does."

Matthew knew it so well that he spent quite a pleasant evening, and was able to make some show of appreciating the culinary excellence for which the club to which Leonard belonged was famous; but the whole of the evening, it appeared, was not to be devoted to tobacco and peaceful conversation, and it was not without dismay that he discovered why he had been made to dine a full hour earlier than usual.

"Now, I'll tell you what I want you to do," Leonard said after they had adjourned to the smoking-room—and it was plain, from the coaxing intonation of his voice, that he had some doubts as to how the suggestion which he was about to make would be received—"I want you just to come round to Grosvenor Place for a few minutes. Did I tell you that some cousins of Lady Sara's, who have gone abroad, have lent her their house for the wedding? Well, they have; and I said I would look in this evening to get final instructions, so as to avoid the risk of any hitch to-morrow."

"You can take your instructions without my assistance, I should think," objected Matthew.

"Yes; but Lady Sara rather wanted to see you. The fact is that she proposes to spend the winter at Wilverton—it seems the best place for her—and we thought you might be able to give her information about lodgings and all that. Indeed, if you didn't mind the trouble, it would be a very great kindness to escort her on her journey. Lilian doesn't feel quite happy about her travelling alone."

In for a penny, in for a pound! Matthew had already swallowed camels of such large proportions that he was scarcely entitled to strain at this gnat; although he could not but marvel a little at Lilian's willingness to meet him and make use of him.

He marvelled still more when he saw her, and when she offered him her hand with a pleasant smile, as though he had been merely an old acquaintance. She was look-

ing brilliantly beautiful, she exhibited no trace of nervousness, her speech and manner struck him as according perfectly with the spacious, luxurious dwelling which had been placed at her mother's disposal. She was going to be a smart, modern married woman, and apparently she had not waited for her marriage to assume the tone that belonged to her future *rôle*. Leonard and she soon retired to the other extremity of the long room, leaving him to talk to Lady Sara, who, for her part, was quite unchanged.

"How good you are!" the penitent lady murmured. "It really isn't natural to be so good, and if you would call me a few bad names, I should feel ever so much more comfortable. Not that I deserve them, Heaven knows!"

"I am sure you don't," Matthew declared cheerfully. "Moreover, it wouldn't add at all to my comfort to call anybody bad names. So we are to have you back at Wilverton, I am glad to hear."

He soon set her at her ease, and in doing so recovered his own mental equilibrium, which had been for a moment in jeopardy. He thought it very likely that he might be able to secure Lady Sara's old rooms in Prospect Place for her; but as she seemed to dread the idea of going to a hotel all by herself, he suggested that she should accompany him home the next day, and stay with him until a more permanent arrangement could be effected. The offer was immediately and gratefully accepted. Lilian, on being informed of it, thanked Matthew with all the warmth, though perhaps with something short of the surprise, that the occasion seemed to call for; he could not help wondering whether it had been expected of him that he should give an invitation which would undoubtedly cause much annoyance to his house-keeper and which might not improbably reawaken the merriment of the good folks of Wilverton.

Well, in any case, he was glad to be of service to Lady Sara, whom he liked, and who had always been kind to him. He was also, it must be confessed, very

glad indeed to get away from Grosvenor Place and from the false position of which nobody but himself appeared to recognize the falsity.

"I shall see you again to-morrow afternoon, so I won't say good-bye," Lilian remarked at the last moment. "So awfully kind of you to take charge of mamma! I shan't worry about her, now that I know she will be in such good hands. By the way, I hope you are prepared for a tremendous function to-morrow. We are going to do the thing in the most approved style, combining decency and propriety, you know, with etc., etc.—like the Economic Funeral Company. How you will hate it all!"

"I don't think I quite expected to enjoy it," answered Matthew quietly, permitting himself that one little piece of bad taste.

It was not resented; nor, if the taste of Lilian's behaviour so far had seemed to him doubtful, could he find any fault with that of her demeanour on the following day, which was as unexceptionable as her costume and the quality of the numerous guests who had been invited to witness her nuptials. Matthew acquitted himself of his own part in the proceedings creditably enough. In the midst of that gay and parti-coloured throng he found that he was less conspicuous than he had expected to be—found, too, that the bitterness of the experience had been to a great extent discounted in advance. He had pictured the scene to himself so many times in imagination that the reality scarcely hurt him. He was even a little interested in casting his eye over the assemblage, which included a number of well-known persons, and in studying the general effect, which was as pleasing as fine clothes, a surpliced choir, and an abundance of plants and cut flowers could make it. If economy had been studied in the matter, that virtue must, he presumed, have found expression only in the omission of the old-fashioned wedding-breakfast, for it looked as though somebody would have a very respectable little bill to pay before other contingent expenses were de-

frayed. Lord Kingsbridge, a wizened little old man, with a waxed moustache and a hyacinthine wig, had come over from Paris, where he resided, to give his niece away ; the bridesmaids had been selected with a due regard alike to rank and to beauty ; the hierarchy was well represented behind the altar-rails ; nothing, in short, save the countenance of Royalty was wanting to impart to the ceremonial a character of the very highest distinction.

In accordance with modern usage, a homily was addressed to the newly-married pair, to which they listened with admirable self-possession ; then the register was signed, and then there was a reception in Grosvenor Place, which was only graced for a few brief minutes by the presence of the bride and bridegroom, who had to catch a train. How grateful we ought to be to the conventional necessities by which we are ruled, and which relieve existence of its most harrowing accessories !

"It hasn't been half as bad as assisting at a clinical lecture," was Matthew's professional and half-humorous summing-up ; "there has been no room for emotion, or a suggestion of it, from start to finish. Such a thing would have been ludicrously out of place, and nobody, to look at us all, could have supposed that we possessed an immortal soul amongst the whole of us."

All things considered, he was glad that he had complied with Leonard's request. He thought the experience had had a bracing effect upon him—as indeed perhaps it had. What tender or regretful or reproachful sentiment could he continue to cherish with regard to a lady whose parting speech to him was, "Mind you make them put a hot-water tin into the railway carriage for mamma to-morrow ; she will be too tired to travel down to-night, I am afraid, and I suppose Wilverton can spare you for another twenty-four hours. Good-bye. My love to your friends the Freres when you see them."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

HONEYMOONING.

FOR reasons which were complex in their nature, and of which the complexity does not demand analysis here, it had pleased Lilian to present herself to Matthew Austin as a heartless and not too delicate young woman; but it was in no such guise, or disguise, that she dealt with her husband. Her love for him was so passionate, so overwhelming, that it seemed as if she could neither speak nor think of anything else; her long and stubborn resistance only made her present surrender the more complete; she delighted in anticipating his wishes and in performing little unnecessary acts of humility for him; to belong entirely and of right to him may have had for her something of the exquisite, albeit transient, savour of a suddenly-legitimized sin.

Wise men and women—especially wise women—would doubtless have shaken their heads over her and warned her that she was setting to work in quite the wrong way; that lovers form one class of human beings, while husbands form another; that nothing is more certain to weary a man in the long run than excessive demonstrations of affection; and that Leonard Jerome, in particular, was not so constituted as to bear that method of treatment. But it is not customary for young couples to be attended during their honeymoon by a chorus of sages, and thus Lilian's prolonged wanderings by sea and land in the sunny regions of the Mediterranean were productive of nothing but unmixed happiness to her.

Leonard, who was also very much in love, was equally happy and equally willing to protract to its utmost limits that experience of earthly paradise which is necessarily brief for everybody, and which comes to an end

for good and all as soon as we are reminded that our present place of residence is not paradise but earth. In the case of this favoured pair such reminders were not likely to be over-insistent. Leonard had no profession nor any urgent duties which could entail a recall to his native land ; he was very well contented to dawdle, without fixed purpose or design, along the Italian, the Spanish, and the North African coasts, to bask among flowers in the warm sun, to be rocked upon gently-heaving waters under azure skies, and to keep up a perpetual dreamy duet which was as yet diversified by no half-hidden discords. If, when he happened to glance at an English sporting paper, it did sometimes occur to him that this was a queer sort of way for a hunting-man in perfect health to be spending the winter, the thought merely added a touch of piquancy to his enjoyment. He had no regrets, no objection to remaining abroad until after Easter, no wish to be roused too soon out of his delicious daydream. The only difference between him and his wife was that he expected, as a matter of course, to wake up some fine morning, whereas she did not.

It was at Palermo, whither their devious peregrinations took them in the month of March, that they were at length deserted by their good luck in the matter of weather. The period of the spring equinox was at hand ; for twenty-four hours a heavy gale, accompanied by torrents of rain, had been raging, and Lilian, her nose forlornly flattened against the window-pane, was unable to detect any symptom of a break in the low, leaden sky.

"It looks as if this might go on until the last inhabitant was drowned!" she exclaimed. "Can that dismal, green sea be our dear Mediterranean? I believe it is the English Channel that has come tumbling across Europe to see how we are getting on."

"It may report to friends at a distance that we are bearing up as well as can be expected," returned Leonard philosophically. He had thrown himself down upon a

sofa, and was lying on the flat of his back, with his hands clasped behind his head and one long leg swinging lazily over the other. "Cheer up," he continued, laughing at the dismal countenance which his wife turned towards him; "we might have been weather-bound in a worse place, after all. What can I suggest for you to do? Reading? — writing? — fancy-work? By the way, now that I come to think of it, I don't believe you have read a single Tauchnitz novel since we were married; and as for a needle, I'm not sure that you even possess such a thing. *Do you ever go in for fancy work, Lil?*"

"Oh yes, I used—and other work too. I have made my own frocks before now. But it wasn't of myself that I was thinking; it was of you. Two wet days in a foreign hotel are such a fearful ordeal for a man!"

"For some men, perhaps; but I'm all right. One of the chief beauties of my character is that I can do nothing for a week at a stretch without grumbling. Didn't old Austin ever tell you how good I was that time when I had deprived myself of the use of both my arms?"

Lilian made no reply; she very seldom did reply when her husband dragged Matthew's name into the conversation. But presently she said,—

"Wouldn't you like to go down to the smoking-room and see whether there are any other occupationless Englishmen there? I think I may as well write to mamma."

Hitherto in the course of their journey they had avoided fellow-travellers, and had spoken only to occasional friends whom they had come across here and there. Perhaps she was not very anxious that he should act upon her suggestion; for she was inclined to be jealous of him, and secretly exulted in the thought that he never cared to leave her. However, he rose, yawned, stretched himself, and said,—

"Well, if you're going to write, I'll just spy out the land for half an hour. I forgot to examine the Visitors'

Book, but I don't suppose there is anybody here whom one knows."

As it happened, there was somebody in the hotel whom he knew—at least, there was somebody who knew him and accosted him at the foot of the staircase, though he, for his part, failed to recognize this well-dressed and carefully-brushed young man, with the fair moustache and the unmistakable air of a British officer in plain clothes.

"Are you at Gib or Malta now?" Leonard asked at a venture, after shaking hands.

"I see you don't know who I am," answered the other, laughing. "We used sometimes to meet in days gone by at my governor's place, near Wilverton. My name's Frere."

"Oh yes, of course! I beg your pardon. That was some years ago, wasn't it?" said Leonard, looking a little askance at his former acquaintance. He had forgotten the circumstances of Spencer's banishment, but was certainly under the impression that the latter had done something very shady. "Have you—er—been home lately?" he inquired.

"I paid a very brief visit to the cradle of my race last autumn," Spencer replied, divining the significance of the question, and responding to it with a certain defiant good-humour, "but I was not pressed to stay. My people, I am sorry to say, don't appreciate me, although I am a respectable married man nowadays, and never do anything naughty. There's no saying what one mightn't be driven to do if one were kept for any length of time in a place like this though. Mercifully, my wife finds it a bit more than she can bear, and she talks of moving on to Malta, where she expects to fall in with some old friends. My wife," added Spencer explanatorily, as he lighted a cigarette, "likes to hear the roll of the drum. She used to reside in a garrison town before she did me the honour of espousing me *en secondes noces*."

"What a fearful cad this man has become!" was

Leonard's inward ejaculation ; " no wonder his poor old father can't stand him ! " Nevertheless, he was amused and almost attracted by Spencer's cheery impudence, which, as he presently reflected, had at least the merit of candour. " I am a scamp who has been married by a rich widow," the fellow seemed to say. " Now you know all about it, and if you prefer to turn your back upon me you can."

It is quite possible that Leonard might have turned his back had this encounter taken place in Hyde Park ; but, local and atmospheric conditions being what they were, he felt entitled to be less particular, and presently he found himself playing an experimental game of billiards with his compatriot upon an ancient, pocketless table, over which the heavy balls rolled slowly with a rumble as of distant thunder. Spencer continued to be chatty and communicative, making no secret of the fact that he had been disowned by his family, and mentioning that his wife was a good deal more sore upon the subject than he was.

" She seemed to think that she had only to show herself for them to rush into her arms," he remarked. " Oddly enough, her appearance didn't produce that effect upon them, and now she blames me for it—which is a most unreasonable thing to do. I always warned her that her style of beauty wasn't what they were accustomed to.—Hullo, Arabella, is that you ? Let me introduce Mr. Jerome, whom I think you must have heard about from Anne. Anyhow, you heard about Mrs. Jerome—though she wasn't Mrs. Jerome then."

Leonard could well believe that the Frere family had failed to be fascinated by the plump lady who entered the billiard-room, and who had availed herself so unstintingly of those preparations whereby the handiwork of Nature is said to be improved. Mrs. Spencer Frere might have been pretty once upon a time ; but that period of her career appeared to belong to a somewhat remote past, and it is always a question whether wrinkles are not more becoming to the human countenance than

three or four thick coats of whitewash. Mrs. Spencer's face was as free from wrinkles as her gown, though far less skilfully made up; her hair was of an uncompromising yellow tint, while her eyebrows and eyelashes were startlingly black—upon the whole, a spectacle to make the compassionate beholder trust that she had no idea of what she looked like.

In all probability she had none, for she combined her acknowledgment of Leonard's bow with an extremely coquettish glance, and her subsequent conversation proved her to be a lady accustomed to admiration. She talked with much volubility and was rather amusing, in a slangy, third-rate style; but Leonard was quite sure that he did not wish to introduce her to his wife, which was a little awkward, because that, it seemed, was just what Mrs. Spencer wanted him to do.

"I am dying to make Mrs. Jerome's acquaintance," she was good enough to declare. "I have been catching glimpses of you both since you arrived, but you're so awfully exclusive that there's no getting near you. I wonder whether we might take the liberty of coming into your sitting-room after dinner this evening; you *must* be so bored, all by yourselves from morning to night!"

Leonard thought for a moment of regretting that his wife had a very bad headache; but he lacked the requisite courage or cruelty. "And, after all," he reflected, "it is in the last degree unlikely that we shall ever see these people again." So he went upstairs to make his excuses to Lilian, who only shrugged her shoulders and said it couldn't be helped; and at the hour appointed the threatened visit was duly paid.

A temporary cessation of wind and rain occurring at that time, the two men soon stepped out upon the balcony to smoke, and Spencer took that opportunity to speak in highly eulogistic terms of a certain common friend of theirs.

"He's too good a fellow for this wicked world; that's all there is the matter with Austin," he remarked. "A

man who's so confoundedly good as all that is bound to be made a victim of, you know. It took me some little time to believe that he wasn't a bit of a humbug, I confess; but there's no doubt about it—he's the real thing."

"There can be no sort of doubt about his being the real thing," Leonard agreed heartily. "Where did you meet him?"

"I'm not sure that he would like me to tell you; he is one of those modest chaps who prefer to blush unseen. As for me, I've lost the trick of blushing, and I only hold my tongue about myself, when I do hold my tongue, for the sake of other people. However, I don't mind telling you that Austin did me a tremendous great service once out of sheer kindness of heart. Deuce another motive can he have had for it that I have ever been able to discover!"

"Oh, that motive would be sufficient for him," Leonard said. "Nobody knows better than I do what a good heart dear old Matthew Austin has."

He had a comfortable feeling that this was a handsome as well as a deserved tribute to pay to the character of his absent friend, and he was quite at a loss to understand why Spencer Frere suddenly burst out laughing. The latter changed the subject, without offering any explanation of his rather rude behaviour, and they discussed quail-shooting until they were summoned back into the sitting-room for their coffee.

Lilian, meanwhile, had been made to feel somewhat ill at ease by the extremely candid revelations of the lady whom she had been left to entertain, and who proclaimed herself, without hesitation or disguise, to be an ill-used, a deceived, and an undeceived woman.

"I don't know whether you have heard my husband's history," Mrs. Spencer said; "I am not sure that I have heard the whole of it myself. But, beyond having been a little wild in his youth, he doesn't seem to have done anything to deserve such treatment as he has received; and, considering that he hadn't a penny of his

own when I married him, I do think I was justified in expecting a different sort of welcome at Hayes Park."

She gave a graphic description of her abortive visit to Wilverton—a description which, if accurate, seemed to go a long way towards accounting for its failure—and then proceeded to bewail her folly in having married a man who was destined to be dependent upon her for the rest of his days. That she had made a bad bargain was doubtless her own fault, and she was too self-seeking and vulgar-minded to command ready sympathy; still, it was evident, from certain incidental expressions, that she had begun by being really fond of her good-for-nothing husband, and that he did not now even pretend to have any affection for her. He never had pretended very much; but Lilian could not know that, so she was moved to the compassion which all young wives feel for the neglected wives of other men.

The consequence was that when Spencer strolled in from the balcony and drew his chair up to the corner of the sofa upon which Mrs. Jerome was seated, his advances were not met in a friendly spirit. Possibly they would not, in any event, have been so met; for his manner with ladies did not err on the side of over-refinement, and the bold stare which he saw fit to fix upon his neighbour was scarcely ingratiating. Be that as it may, he had not been talking for many minutes before he was so sharply snubbed that he very nearly lost his temper. He avenged himself by remarking,—

"You seem to have the gift of saying uncommonly nasty things, Mrs. Jerome; I hope you don't inflict many of them on your husband. Not that he doesn't deserve some punishment, if it comes to that."

Lilian, stirred by some vague suspicion, was foolish enough to return,—

"I don't know what you mean."

"Oh, I was only thinking of poor Austin. That was a scurvy trick that you played upon him, both of you, by all accounts, and you ought to be made to smart for it

in one way or another. Though I must say that I don't feel quite as sorry for him as I did."

The great advantage of downright insult over mere innuendo—and many modern politicians appear to be aware of this—is that it so often renders retaliation impossible. Short of making an absurd and undignified scene, there was really no answer to be made to the man; and Lilian perhaps did the only thing that could be done by getting up and walking across to the window, where Mrs. Spencer, with her coffee-cup in her hand, was entertaining Leonard with an account of an exciting polo match between the 22nd Lancers and the 9th Hussars.

"Such good fellows, all of them, and great friends of mine! I only wish there was a cavalry regiment at Malta, but perhaps there may be somebody on the staff who will help to cheer me up a little."

Spencer, not in the least abashed, came up and joined in the conversation.

"Arabella," he explained, "is like the Grande Duchesse de Gérolstein—*elle aime les militaires*. In fact, she resembles the Grande Duchesse in more ways than one. Fritz, if you remember——"

"Oh, nobody remembers an opera that came out before we were any of us born," interrupted Mrs. Spencer, sacrificing strict veracity to a desire to close her husband's mouth.

Outspoken though she was, she did not particularly care about telling everybody that she had espoused a ranker, and Spencer was entirely devoid of shame or reticence upon the subject.

As soon as the couple had departed, Lilian exclaimed,—

"What outrageous people! Now mind, Leonard, nothing—*nothing* on earth—will induce me to speak to that man again!"

"Well, he is rather offensive, I must admit," said Leonard.

"*Rather* offensive!—he is simply the most impudent human being that I have ever met in all my life!"

"Why, what has he been saying to you?" asked Leonard with uplifted brows.

But Lilian did not explain; and at that moment Leonard's servant entered the room, bearing a batch of belated letters from England, which caused Spencer Frere to be temporarily forgotten.

After a few moments Leonard looked up from his correspondence and whistled.

"By Jove, Lil!" said he, "here's quite a new development. My old uncle writes that Grey, who has represented Wilverton for the last ten years, has accepted a colonial governorship, and he wants me to stand for the vacancy. What do you think?"

"I don't know," answered Lilian doubtfully. "Would that mean that we should have to go back at once?"

"Oh, it would mean going back at once, of course. The only question is whether I am to embrace a Parliamentary career or not. It is what the old man has always wished, and I presume, from what he says, that he intends to see me through—as far as expenses go, I mean. And it's rather important not to offend him, you know."

Lilian felt that it would be out of the question to hesitate, and she said as much. Nevertheless, she added rather dolorously,—

"We must give up Rome at Easter then, and Sorrento and Amalfi and—and everything! Aren't you a little bit sorry, Leonard?"

"Oh, I'm inconsolable!" he answered, laughing and kissing her. "Still, we *have* had a tolerably liberal share of honeymooning, haven't we?"

CHAPTER XXIX.

SIR WILLIAM BAXENDALE.

ONE dry, windy afternoon in spring, Matthew was about to enter the house in Prospect Place which had been occupied by Lady Sara Murray for some months past, when the door was opened to give egress to Mrs. Frere, whose carriage was waiting for her.

"So it is all settled, I hear," said she, "and the Jeromes are expected back from Italy any day. Lady Sara seems to be in the seventh heaven about it."

"I didn't know it was settled," answered Matthew; "I knew Jerome had been asked to stand."

"Oh yes; he is to issue his address as soon as he arrives. Of course one must pray for his success, since he is coming forward in the Conservative interest; still I can't help feeling a little personal bias in favour of Sir William Baxendale, who might just as well have called himself a Liberal Unionist. You haven't met Sir William yet, have you?"

Matthew shook his head.

"I never meet anybody except patients in these days."

"Oh, I know that," returned Mrs. Frere with a laugh; "I am quite tired of asking you to dine and being told how deeply you regret that you are too busy to make dinner engagements. But I wish you could meet Sir William, because I am sure you would like him, and he is one of our oldest friends. He shut the place up and went away, you know, after poor Lady Baxendale died two years ago; but he seems to have quite recovered now, and he means to live at home in future, I believe, whether he is returned or not."

"Well, I am glad you will not lose your friend if the election goes as I hope it will," remarked Matthew.

Mrs. Frere smiled.

"Oh, I don't think we shall lose him," she answered. Then she looked as if she had something more to say, and finally could not resist saying it. "Quite between ourselves," she began—"would you mind walking on a few steps with me? The carriage can follow—*quite* between ourselves, I have certain little hopes of my own. Anne has been a great deal at the Priory lately; she is fond of the two girls, who are growing up now, and she has always been intimate with Emma Baxendale, Sir William's sister, who is keeping house for him provisionally. Of course all this is entirely in the clouds, and I may be altogether mistaken about his wishes; still—it *would* be such a good thing, wouldn't it?"

"Isn't he rather old for her?" Matthew hazarded.

"Only fifty-four, which is really nothing nowadays. Besides, I have felt convinced for a long time past that Anne would end by bestowing herself upon some widower or other. What I was afraid of was that she would select a poverty-stricken widower with an endless family. Now this dear Sir William must have a clear £15,000 a year, George says, and only the two girls, who will be grown-up and married before one knows where one is."

"I see," said Matthew absently.

"Why do you look as if you disapproved? Surely you don't think his being a Radical is any objection! A man with his estates can't really be a Radical; it is only a way of talking. And, after all, it would be rather dull if everybody held the same opinions."

"Sir William Baxendale has my full leave to hold any political opinions that he likes," answered Matthew, rousing himself from his abstraction and laughing. "As far as that goes, I dare say I should be a Radical myself, if I were anything. From what you tell me, I should say that the match would be a most suitable one in every way, except as regards disparity of age. And, to be sure, a man of fifty-four is not necessarily an old man."

Nevertheless, this project did not please him. It kept

recurring to his thoughts all through his subsequent talk with Lady Sara, who was in high spirits at the prospect of seeing Lilian again so soon, and who was persuaded that a seat in Parliament would be the very thing to provide her son-in-law with an outlet for superfluous energy. There was no real reason, save the one he had mentioned, for objecting to Anne's marriage with the widowed baronet: assuredly the reason which might once have existed was not even remotely present to his mind. He had seen very little of her during the winter months, and had never been readmitted to that footing of intimacy which had rendered the early period of their acquaintanceship so pleasant. He liked her, and was still a good deal interested in her; but as he was pretty sure that, for some reason or other, she did not like him, he had not gone out of his way to seek her society. It could not, therefore, make much difference to him whether she married A. or B. or remained a spinster. Upon the whole, he concluded that what had rubbed him the wrong way was Mrs. Frere's genially unromantic treatment of the affair. If one is to have no romance in one's own life, one does like to be refreshed by glimpses of it in the lives of one's friends.

Refreshment of that nature was dealt out to him ungrudgingly a few days later, when Leonard Jerome invaded his solitude at an early hour with descriptions of life in the glorious south which were almost as regretful as they were enthusiastic.

"I thought I should catch you if I rode over the first thing in the morning," Leonard said. "Have you any breakfast to give a hungry man? We're staying at the Grange, you know, and the old man never shows before the middle of the day, so I ventured to absent myself."

He proclaimed himself supremely happy; he declared that his existence since his marriage had been one continuous dream of bliss; he was evidently under the impression that these tidings would give unqualified satisfaction to the friend who had formerly been his rival.

"I assure you," said he, "that when we landed at

Dover yesterday in a vile east wind, I had more than half a mind to be off back again by the night boat."

"And the election?" said Matthew, laughing.

"Oh, well, the election—yes, it wouldn't have done to miss one's chances; though what they are worth I'm sure I don't know. Uncle Richard is full of confidence, and so amiable that I think he must be going to die. He couldn't have welcomed me more affectionately last night if I had been a returned prodigal—which is what he seems to take me for. I trust I shan't grieve him by coming in at the bottom of the poll; but, judging by the letters that I have received, Baxendale will take a lot of beating, and there isn't too much time. The whole thing will be a horrid grind, that's certain! Now, let's hear your news. What have you been doing with yourself all this winter?"

"Very much what I did last winter," answered Matthew, "and very much what I shall do in all future winters, I suppose. The daily round, the common task—you would call it a horrid grind, but it seems to satisfy me."

"It is always satisfactory to do things which one knows that one can do thoroughly well," Leonard declared generously. "Lady Sara says you are *the* swell doctor of Wilverton now, and old Jennings will soon have to retire on his ill-gotten gains."

"Oh, you have seen Lady Sara, then?"

"Yes, she dined with us last night. She had never been inside the house before, and I think the sight of all those expensive pictures and that general magnificence increased her respect for me. It's lucky that Uncle Richard is too obstinate to consult you professionally; otherwise, I know you would make a point of keeping him alive up to the age of ninety. You have such mistaken notions of benevolence!"

Matthew did not smile, finding that these jokes of Leonard's had rather too much flavour of earnestness about them to be funny, and presently the latter resumed,—

“Oh, and that reminds me that we came across one undeserving subject of your benevolence in Sicily—Spencer Frere, the son of the old boy at Hayes Park, who won't have anything to do with him because he's so beastly undeserving. I must say he looks the character. When you get an opportunity, just ask Lil how she liked him, and then you'll hear some language! He's grateful to you, though—says you did him a great service once. Does that mean that you were insane enough to back a bill for him?”

Matthew said it did not mean that, but declined to be drawn into further revelations. He asked a few questions, however, about Spencer and his wife, thinking that Anne might perhaps be glad of any information that he could give her respecting her brother.

But indeed Leonard's report was of so discouraging a nature that it seemed scarcely worth imparting to any of Spencer's well-wishers, and Matthew must have had some other motive, conscious or unconscious, for stopping Miss Frere when he met her in the street that same afternoon. She was accompanied by a stout, good-humoured, middle-aged lady whom he at once divined to be Miss Baxendale, and to whom he was presently introduced.

“Emma is canvassing from house to house,” Anne explained; “I wait outside, because I mustn't countenance Radical misrepresentations.”

“But your sympathies step in with me, my dear; I take care to mention that to electors, who quite understand that you are not to blame for being the daughter of a malignant Tory,” Miss Baxendale remarked with a loud but not disagreeable laugh.

And as this capable lady had business to transact in the house opposite to which they were standing, Matthew took advantage of being left for a few minutes with her companion to ask,—

“Is that so? Are your sympathies with the opposite candidate?”

“I am afraid I have no very strong political sym-

pathies either way," she answered. "I am a Tory just as I am a member of the Church of England, and I am quite contented to be both. Only it wasn't I who formed my convictions; they were handed over to me ready-made."

"Then perhaps it is with Sir William Baxendale, as an individual, that you sympathize?"

"Well, I certainly prefer him as an individual to Mr. Jerome. However, as I have no vote, I shall not be tempted to betray my party, so it doesn't matter. I suppose," added Anne, looking down the street, "you have not seen the Jeromes since they arrived."

Matthew replied that he had seen one of them, and then mentioned the circumstance of their having fallen in with Spencer at Palermo.

"I thought you would like to hear that your brother was well and—prosperous," he said, by way of apology for having detained her.

"What did Mr. Jerome think of them?" inquired Anne quickly. "Did he say that they were prospering?—that they got on well together?"

"Oh, I believe he only saw them once," answered Matthew evasively.

"Ah! I understand. I have had very little hope from the first. It is just possible that they may remain friends until he has spent all her money; but after that——"

"You must not be such a pessimist," said Matthew. "For one thing, I don't see why she should allow him to spend all her money; and, for another thing, I have reason to know that your brother is not ungrateful to people who have helped him."

"He will never be grateful to her, because she is his wife. I dare say you wouldn't feel as I do, but it seems to me that Spencer's marriage is much the worst thing that he has done—the most degrading, I mean. To marry merely for the sake of comfort or position is unpardonable in a man, I think."

"But not in a woman?" asked Matthew, eyeing her curiously.

"A woman's case is different; her motives aren't likely to be altogether selfish. Anyhow, she doesn't despise herself for having acted in that way as a man must."

An imprudent and impolite observation was upon the tip of Matthew's tongue, but was fortunately checked by the advent of a broad-shouldered, thick-set gentleman, whose short beard was besprinkled with grey, yet whose comely countenance certainly did not seem to have faced the world for upwards of half a century. Sir William Baxendale was, and is, an extremely popular personage with all classes, being the happy possessor of those three great incentives to popularity—a full purse, an admirable temper, and a pleasant manner. He was not at all unlikely to succeed in any enterprise to which he might turn his attention, and he told Anne cheerfully that, so far as he could see, he was going to win that election.

"I have just met my opponent," said he—"a nice young fellow, but scarcely formidable. Grey, of course, was a distinguished man, and constituencies rather like to be represented by distinguished men; still I am by no means sure that even Grey would have come in again upon the present register." He knew all about Matthew, with whom he shook hands heartily, remarking that differences of political opinion were, luckily, no bar to private friendship. "Mr. Frere himself, in whose presence I dare not so much as utter the name of my revered leader, hasn't turned his back upon me yet," he added, laughing.

Upon the whole, Matthew, as he went his way, could not but acknowledge that the woman who should marry Sir William Baxendale would not have the same reasons for self-contempt as the man who had married Mrs. Johnson. "I suppose she means to take him," he reflected. "Well, it's her affair, and one can't blame her—though I fancied that in matters of that kind she had a rather higher standard than the rest of her sex. But probably the differences between them are only differences of degree."

The impartiality of Matthew's judgment had, it will

be perceived, been slightly disturbed by his personal experiences ; and indeed he would have been an amazingly impartial and clear-sighted man if, during the days that followed, he had been able to do justice to Lilian. He saw her frequently both at the Grange and at her mother's house, but found it quite impossible to be friendly with her. That she should avoid him as much as she could was doubtless natural enough ; but he really did not see what he had done to deserve the sarcastic, flippant tone which it pleased her to assume in addressing him, nor did he like her allusions to his friendship for Miss Frere, whose name, it appeared, was already being freely mentioned in conjunction with that of the Radical candidate.

"Had you not better be bestirring yourself?" Lilian asked him one day. "This doughty Sir William evidently doesn't let the grass grow under his feet, and if he can't beat Leonard he may console himself by cutting you out. But perhaps you are too philosophical to mind being cut out."

It seemed to Matthew that bad taste could hardly go further than that, and he may be excused for congratulating himself in that he was at least able to endure with philosophy the memory of having been cut out once.

What became increasingly evident to him, as the day fixed for the election drew near, was that Sir William had a very good chance indeed of beating Leonard. Although he took no active part in the proceedings, his daily avocations took him amongst electors of all ranks, and, hearing their opinions, he was able to guess in which direction the current of popular favour was setting. Everybody liked Sir William ; not a few shared his views ; a somewhat important section of the community appeared to have come to the conclusion that turn about was fair play. And then the energy and good-humour of the man won him many wavering adherents. Leonard, on the other hand, was not very energetic ; he was not very well known ; and, although his meetings were respectably attended and his speeches received with applause,

it was more than doubtful whether he had caught the ear of those uncertain voters who, by the irony of fate, rule the destinies of this land.

"I'm getting left behind," Leonard himself told Matthew; "I can feel it, though I'm assured that we ought to have a clear five hundred majority. But it would be as much as my place was worth to say so at the Grange. Uncle Richard has made up his mind that I am to romp in, and then advance with quick, easy strides to the Treasury bench. He told me in so many words yesterday that I need have no fear of being too poor to keep up a high position. Well, a man can but do his best!"

No man, certainly, can do more; but the unfortunate thing is that not many men who fail are allowed credit for having done as much, and when Sir William Baxendale headed the poll with a majority of over two hundred, Mr. Litton's wrath against his nephew was all the greater because Leonard accepted defeat with becoming equanimity.

"Oh, you need not take so much trouble to show that you don't care," said he bitterly; "that has been tolerably obvious all along. An absolute certainty thrown away through sheer laziness and indifference! Well, since you think you were sent into the world for no other purpose than to amuse yourself, all I can say is that I trust you have the means of gratifying your tastes. What do you propose to do now, pray?"

"I have no very definite plan in my mind," answered Leonard, who knew that it would be useless to protest against the old man's unreasonable anger. "What would you suggest?"

"Oh, it is not for me to make suggestions; my one experiment in that direction has not had a very encouraging result. I was only wondering whether your next step would be to take a furnished house in London for the season."

"That is what I should have done if I had had the good luck to be returned, you know," said Leonard a little apprehensively; for the truth was that he had rather expected his uncle to pay the rent of the house in question.

"And as you have not been returned?"

"I think a month or two of London will be almost necessary; we could hardly begin to vegetate down at Stanwick forthwith."

"H'm! So your wife and your mother-in-law appear to think. For my own part, if I might venture to offer a suggestion, it would be that you should keep clear of debt and live within your income—especially as your election expenses are likely to prove rather heavy, I'm afraid."

With this extremely unkind speech, Mr. Litton walked off, leaving Leonard to pull a long face and ask himself whether the old man could really mean to be as bad as his word. It was true that no promise had ever been made as to the defrayal of those election expenses; still there had been a tacit understanding that Leonard should not suffer for having complied with his uncle's wish, and it would be a distinct breach of faith to inflict a heavy fine upon him because the electors had not proved equally accommodating. He confided his misgivings to Matthew, who subsequently broached the subject to Mr. Litton with very unsatisfactory results.

"Let him pay," said the old gentleman shortly; "he has allowed himself to be beaten, and he must take the consequences of defeat. Perhaps this will teach him that prizes are not to be won by simply standing still and holding out your hand."

"And suppose he can't pay?" Matthew suggested.

"I imagine that he can raise the required amount and more. If he finds himself pinched, so much the better. I am under no illusion, I assure you; I foresee that the day will come when I shall have to help him out of his difficulties. Only I prefer to wait until he is in a frame of mind to accept conditions as well as cheques. Believe me, my dear Austin, you don't know that fellow yet. It is more to the credit of your heart than of your head that you don't, and it is fortunate for me and for him, and perhaps for you too, that I know you both. Now we will say no more about it, please."

CHAPTER XXX.

GIVE AND TAKE.

READY though Leonard was to take his beating, as beatings always ought to be taken, with good-humour, he would have been better pleased if his wife had shown some little sign of participating in Mr. Litton's and Lady Sara's mortification. Considering that what had happened to him was really a somewhat serious misfortune, she might, he thought, have remembered that it is a woman's mission to console. Also it might have occurred to her that another branch of woman's mission is to cajole, and that she ought to be bringing feminine arts to bear upon that intractable old uncle of his.

She did neither the one nor the other, because she was not personally disappointed by Leonard's failure, and because she particularly disliked old Mr. Litton. She wanted to keep her husband for herself; she had no wish to make a present of him and his time to the nation; while, as for her host, the truth is that he had not been at the pains to show her the slightest civility. If Lilian did not like Mr. Litton, it is certain that Mr. Litton did not like Lilian. He had his own opinion of her; he considered that she had jilted an excellent man for a worthless one; he thought her present demeanour towards Matthew shamelessly callous, and the fashionable jargon which she had picked up in London displeased him. He detested fashionable ladies, detesting them none the less because he only knew them by hearsay, and he suspected that his nephew's wife would end badly. "No accomplishments, no resources, a pretty face, and a husband who will tire of her in a year—it's easy to foretell what that will lead to," he said to himself.

Consequently, Lilian asked for nothing better than to

leave Wilverton Grange. Her own wish was to go straight to Stanwick; but Leonard impatiently scouted such an idea.

"Wait till you have tried the north-east coast in spring!" said he; "why, the place would be simply uninhabitable at this season of the year! Of course you must go to London and see your friends, like other people. It's a nuisance, because it will cost money, and that old bear seems inclined to punish me by starving me out; still there's no help for it that I can see."

"But I really have no friends whom I care a straw about in London," Lilian declared. "Why shouldn't we go to Stanwick and build up big fires? I suppose coal is cheap in that neighbourhood?"

"Oh, nonsense! You wouldn't be able to stand it for a week," returned Leonard; "and even if you could, I couldn't. The very thought of such an existence—well, I beg your pardon, Lil," he broke off with a laugh, in answer to her reproachful look; "I didn't mean to be rude. But life in the depths of the country, when there's neither hunting nor shooting nor fishing to be had, is rather slow work for a man, you know."

After that Lilian held her peace. And indeed Lady Sara quite agreed with her son-in-law that a season, or at least a fragment of a season, in London was indispensable. According to her lights, it was a matter of duty for the bride to be presented on her marriage; she thought, too, that it would be a sad mistake to lose sight of the acquaintances who had proved amiable and hospitable the year before.

"It is so easy to be forgotten," she remarked, "and there is really no excuse for your absenting yourselves just now. Later on, of course, excuses are apt to come in the natural order of things, and everybody understands; but for the present you ought to be *en évidence*."

So, there being no symptom of the excuse alluded to, Lilian was taken by her husband to the flat which still remained upon his hands, where they made shift to instal themselves while looking out for a more commodious

dwelling. They could not discover what they wanted within reach, save at an extravagant price, nor could they bring themselves to adopt the alternative of seeking refuge in the far west borders of Kensington; the task of house-hunting, always disheartening, was rendered doubly difficult for them because one of them did not know how much they ought to give, while the other (who declined to say) alternated between parsimony and recklessness. In the end he decided suddenly upon a house in Hans Place, which, although of modest dimensions, commanded a sufficiently imposing rent. The house-agent assured him that he was making an uncommonly good bargain, and that it was not everybody who cared to leave such costly china or so much *bric-à-brac* at the mercy of a tenant.

Lilian could have done with a little less china and *bric-à-brac*; still the stowing of it away and the rearranging of the furniture kept her fully occupied for some days, and prevented her from feeling too lonely when her husband went out without her. It would have been absurd to expect that he should dance attendance upon her all day long; she acknowledged that, although she felt the change between the present state of things and those halcyon days in southern latitudes. Once, when she asked him where he had been, he answered, with a touch of irritation,—

“Oh, I’ve been at the club, if you want to know, but we mustn’t get into the habit of catechizing one another, Lil. It’s a most reprehensible practice—almost as bad as opening one another’s letters.”

He favoured her with several of these half-good-humoured rebukes, some of which she may have deserved. He was, and was likely to remain, an indulgent husband; but he was a husband now—he was no longer an anxious and attentive lover. For the rest, it was not long before Lilian had little leisure time left her in which to lament over the inevitable. After Easter, everybody—in her limited sense of that term—came up to London, visitors and engagements grew unmanageably numerous, and

the successes of the previous year were more than repeated. If the statements of those who are in a position to speak with authority may be accepted, the social life of a very pretty young married woman who is blessed with friends and relations in high places must be a decidedly exciting and enjoyable one. These ladies, it is said, have a much better time of it than their unmarried sisters, because their situation is a less ambiguous one—although some might think that their proceedings also were not invariably devoid of ambiguity. Be that as it may, Mrs. Jerome went out a great deal, and was immensely admired and did credit to her husband in all respects. It may be assumed that she enjoyed the admiration; it is certain that she enjoyed the excitement, and that the sensation of being always in a hurry helped her to live only for the moment—which is as pleasant a way of living as another, while youth and health hold out.

That all this gaiety entailed expenditure scarcely needs to be said. The young couple—so Lilian's experienced relatives assured her—were not expected to entertain; still entertainment is, after all, a relative term, and the little house in Hans Place became the scene of frequent informal dinner-parties. Extravagance, too, is a relative term. What Leonard's annual income might amount to his wife had never been told; probably he himself could hardly have said—for how is a man to know, in these days, what his rents will bring him in? But he took to grumbling at the household expenses, and was so vexed when a curtailment of hospitality was proposed to him that that suggestion was not renewed. Lady Sara, who arrived from Wilverton in due course, and for whom a quiet lodging in the neighborhood of Sloane Street was secured, advised Lilian not to worry too much about these sordid questions, and above all not to worry her husband.

"There is nothing a man hates so much as being made to economize in trifles," she said. "If he calls you a bad manager, you mustn't mind. They all do that when

pay-day comes; and then they forget about it, unless you insist upon reminding them. Besides, you are sure to be better off before very long. Dr. Jennings told Mrs. Jennings, who told Mrs. Frere, who told me, that poor old Mr. Litton might die any day."

No doubt this consolatory intelligence enabled Leonard to contemplate with fortitude a financial situation which might otherwise have been somewhat alarming. Moreover, he was careless and optimistic by nature; had he been less so, he would not have taken it for granted that Lilian was as entirely satisfied as he was with their present mode of existence.

There were, as a fact, features in it which did not satisfy her at all. She was no longer an *ingénue*; she had learnt a great deal, and was quite aware that the manners of the present day are not unduly strait-laced; still she could not and did not like Leonard's flirtations. It was true that these were as often as not carried on under her very nose; it was probable that he meant nothing at all by them; and yet they exasperated her. Very likely they would not have done so if the ladies to whom he was pleased to devote himself could have denied themselves the satisfaction of an occasional triumphant glance in her direction. But they never do deny themselves that satisfaction. Who knows what troubles and scandals might not be averted if they did!

Now, there was a certain Mrs. Papillon, a tall woman with sleepy, dark-blue eyes and a finely-developed figure, whose privilege it was to be at this time the subject of Lilian's special animosity. As she was no longer quite in her first youth, had never been precisely beautiful, and was intensely stupid, she might very well have been despised; but Leonard, who laughed at her behind her back, had a way of gazing sentimentally into those violet eyes which was provoking to witness. He pretended to find her amusing, and was fond, when he had a disengaged evening, of arranging combined visits to the theatre with her and her quiet little sandy-haired husband. It was after one of these joint expeditions (which always

terminated with supper in Hans Place) that Lilian made a disagreeable discovery. The Papillons had wished her good-night, and had left her free to indulge in the yawns which she had been politely devouring for several hours past, when she recollected that she had left some unopened letters in the morning-room. Going downstairs to fetch them, and passing the little sandy-haired man, who was seated in the hall, staring patiently at his shoes, she arrived just in time to overhear a few words, murmured by Mrs. Papillon, while Leonard tenderly enveloped her in her opera-cloak. The words, to tell the truth, were silly rather than compromising, and Leonard did not look at all abashed by his wife's sudden appearance ; but Mrs. Papillon's hastily-suppressed giggle made Lilian's blood boil. She maintained a show of composure until she was alone with her husband, and then said in a voice which trembled slightly,—

“ Leonard, I will not have that woman in the house again. If you want to see her you must contrive meetings with her somewhere else.”

“ My dear girl,” he remonstrated, “ don't be so ridiculous ! I am sorry you heard what she said ; but really, you know——”

“ Really what ? ” asked Lilian, speaking in a tone which he had not heard from her since their marriage, and which reminded him unpleasantly of half-forgotten days gone by.

“ I did think you had too much good sense to be jealous ! ” he exclaimed plaintively. “ I suppose I ought to take it as a compliment ; but—won't it become a little inconvenient if I am never allowed to speak to any woman who isn't either old or hideous ? ”

“ I don't wish to put you to inconvenience,” answered Lilian coldly ; “ you are perfectly free to amuse yourself in your own way, so long as you do not insult me publicly. But I will not receive Mrs. Papillon again, and you can tell her so if you like. I doubt whether she will be surprised.”

“ It is so likely that I shall tell her such a thing as

that!" returned Leonard, half laughing, half vexed. "Come, Lil; you don't really imagine that I have been making love to Mrs. Papillon, do you?"

"Yes; since you ask me, that is just what I do imagine; she certainly wouldn't have spoken as she did without a good deal of encouragement. You can go on making love to her, if you choose; only it must not be in your own house any more."

Leonard might easily have made his peace with his wife there and then, and at the bottom of his heart he knew that he might; but he was annoyed with her for making a scene upon what he considered such very insufficient grounds, and he thought that to profess contrition and promise amendment would be a rather weak proceeding. So, with an eye to future comfort, he said,—

"All this is the most dreadful nonsense! If you insist upon it, we can drop the Papillons, though I am not going to make you a general laughing-stock by announcing that you are jealous of the woman. But I must say that I don't see how we are to go on seeing our friends at all unless you are prepared to—how shall I put it?—to give and take a little."

"Are *you* prepared to give and take?" asked Lilian with an ominous tremor in her voice.

"Certainly I am—within the usual recognized limits. I have complete confidence in you, and I think you might have rather more in me," answered Leonard virtuously. He added, after a pause: "London isn't Arcadia, and life can't be one long honeymoon, you know, Lil."

"Very well," she returned, gathering up her long skirt and moving towards the door; "I will endeavour not to shock you by behaving like a mere *bourgeoise* again. I think we clearly understand one another now—which, after all, is the main thing. As for Mrs. Papillon, upon second thoughts, I won't shut the door against her; it would be scarcely worth while, would it?"

Leonard was not quite sure that night whether he had gained a victory or not; but on the following day he felt no more doubt about the matter, for Lilian was

in good spirits, and appeared to have entirely got the better of her unexpected fit of jealousy. It was true that she held him at a certain distance, and that some endearing epithets to which he had become accustomed had dropped out of her vocabulary; but that was not unnatural. He could understand her having felt hurt—possibly even outraged—by an episode which was really without significance, and he would have offered her a frank apology had he not been persuaded that it would be bad policy to do so. Meanwhile, he nobly resolved that he would make the silent concession of avoiding Mrs. Papillon (who happened to bore him) from that day forth.

London, as Leonard had truly remarked, is not Arcadia, nor have two young married people who frequent the liveliest circles of its society much leisure left to them for billing and cooing. The Jeromes got on together wonderfully well for some little time, because during that time they were only nominally together, and one of them congratulated himself upon his wisdom in having made a stand against excessive prudery at the outset. He was not weary of his wife—he looked forward to a renewal of their former relations at some happy future date; but for the moment he judged it expedient that she should learn to do as others did, and assimilate the tone of that section of the community which it was her manifest destiny to adorn. He did not see, or perhaps did not choose to see, that she was taking him somewhat too literally at his word. With her face she had not far to seek for admirers, nor did she repel the advances which were speedily made to her from various quarters. She began to be talked about; the watchful and friendly dowagers who had been instrumental in launching her upon her career the year before warned her that it wouldn't do, and were politely snubbed for their pains. Then one of them deemed it as well to breathe a hint to Leonard, who kept his eyes open and saw sundry incidents which seemed to call for intervention on his part. Driving home with his wife late one evening, he took occasion to say, in a tone of kindly reproof,—

"I don't want to make any complaint, Lil, but of course you can't know as much as I do about all the men whom you meet, and there are one or two fellows whom I would rather that you were not quite so familiar with."

"Are there?" she returned with a yawn. "If you will tell me who they are I won't be quite so familiar with them then."

He mentioned a few names and gave a few reasons for mentioning them; to which she replied indifferently,—

"All right; they shall be placed upon my black list."

This ready acquiescence did not altogether please Leonard, who had anticipated something different. He meditated uneasily for a few minutes, and then abruptly burst out,—

"I say, Lil, hasn't this gone on long enough? Can't we—well, kiss and be friends?"

"Aren't we friends?" she asked in a tone of sleepy surprise.

"You know we are not. I'm sorry I put your back up about Mrs. Papillon, and you may have noticed that I scarcely ever speak to her now."

"Don't you? I haven't noticed."

"Well, so it is, anyhow; and of course I understand that you have been going on as you have done lately to punish me. I don't grumble; it was a fair retort enough—although it stands to reason that a man may do lots of things which a woman can't safely do—but I think we might cry quits now."

He took her hand, which she did not withdraw; but he hardly knew what to make of her rejoinder.

"There is no need for this touching reconciliation," she said, laughing; "we haven't quarrelled, and really, if you will believe me—but I suppose you won't—I had no intention of punishing you. Oh, here we are at home, thank goodness! I am too tired to talk any more now, but if you will remind me to-morrow about those men whom you don't wish me to cultivate, I will make a point of neglecting them."

CHAPTER XXXI.

IN SEARCH OF A FRIEND.

To men of Leonard Jerome's cheery, eupeptic temperament, reflection, analysis, and the weighing of one consideration against another are a weariness of the flesh. They have fits of deep dejection and resentment against Fate when things go askew with them ; but these seldom last long, and beneath their despondency lurks always a happy conviction that somehow or other it will be all right in the end. Leonard, therefore, soon shook off the sensation of uneasy bewilderment which fell upon him after that brief colloquy with his wife. He did not understand what she would be at, he dimly perceived that she was not exactly the woman he had taken her for ; but to try and arrive at a comprehension of her standpoint by recollecting what her education and early surroundings had been, and by making due allowance for the principle of heredity (a method which he would certainly have adopted had she been a horse or a dog), would have been altogether foreign to his nature. It was much simpler to conclude that, despite her assurance to the contrary, she had meant to pay him out for his venial offence, and it was likewise for the comfort of a man who hated scenes to assume that the best plan was to say no more about it. She would "come round" if she was left alone, he thought; and he proceeded, with a light heart, to leave her alone accordingly.

Nevertheless, Lilian had spoken truly. She did not wish to punish her husband, nor did she believe that it was in her power to punish him by exciting his jealousy. All she wished was to forget, if possible, her own unhappiness, which was very great ; and she took the means which came readiest to her hand. She was conscious of having

sacrificed much—her self-respect amongst other things—for Leonard's sake, and she now saw that he had not been worthy of the sacrifice. She had, of course, been a little jealous of Mrs. Papillon, and her husband's manner with other women had displeased her; but these were trifles: the real calamity was that Leonard no longer loved her—perhaps never had loved her nor experienced any sentiment with regard to her beyond admiration for her beauty and a desire to secure what had seemed to be denied to him. When to this it is added that she was young, that she had an intense natural craving for happiness, and that her standard of rectitude was not a particularly exalted one, it will be perceived that Mrs. Jerome was in a somewhat perilous condition of mind.

Fortunately for her, peril did not chance to present itself at that time in a concrete form. The men whom she had allowed to whisper impertinences in her ear, and to whom, in compliance with Leonard's request, she now turned a cold shoulder, had neither interested nor amused her. They had kept her brain and her tongue occupied; but there were plenty of others equally available for that purpose. It cannot be said that she was discreet in her conduct; yet, on the other hand, nothing definite could be alleged against her: the only remark that could be made—and it was made with some frequency—was that she was beginning to emancipate herself rather early in the day.

Madame d'Aultran, who came up to claim acquaintance at the French Embassy one evening, was full of arch allusions to the above effect, and professed an extreme curiosity to hear what had become of "that poor doctor—the most eccentric type that I have met with yet in your island of eccentricities. He was actually at your wedding, was he not? and in a most conspicuous capacity. Now, that could not have happened anywhere in the world but in England."

"Mr. Austin is a great friend of my husband's," said Lilian.

"And a little bit of yours, it must be avowed. And

now he has retired to his province, eh? But perhaps he will emerge again when friendship calls—friendship for your husband, *bien entendu*. You allow him his fair share of liberty, *par parenthèse*, that husband of yours.”

Lilian had become callous to thrusts which would once have roused her ire.

“It is the custom to do so, is it not?” she returned carelessly. “I have always understood that you favoured that system.”

“Oh, I!” cried Madame d’Aultran with a shrieking laugh and an upward jerk of her bare shoulders—“I am not an Englishwoman, and I did not make a love-match. My husband does as he pleases and lets me do as I please. To be sure, you enjoy the same privilege, they say. It is all very interesting and a little comic. One thinks one has witnessed the whole drama; but not at all. We have only reached the second act, and I am quite impatient for the *dénouement* and the reappearance of the faithful doctor. What puzzles me is the exact part he can be made to play; for, after all, he is an Englishman, and he seemed to me to be very practical, as well as very moral.”

Lilian did not take the trouble to reply; but in this time of her distress her thoughts often turned to the true friend whom she had injured and whom she had afterwards intentionally insulted. She knew now that her girlish affection for him had not been love; she knew also that she had cured him of his fancy. She did not regret having alienated him—it had been necessary to do that—but she sometimes longed for the sympathy and counsel which he might have given her. Neither the one nor the other could be expected from her mother, and it was the result of circumstances that she had not a single friend in the whole world. Thus she stood, facing the whole world and its temptations, a solitary, smiling figure, much envied by the majority of those who beheld her, and with no other equipment against danger than a certain defiant, intermittent pride.

Leonard thought he was in great luck when he and his

wife were invited to spend the Ascot week with Lilian's well-to-do cousins, who had taken a house at Sunninghill for that meeting. That they should forego Ascot altogether had not presented itself to him as a possible form of economy, although he had the best reasons for wishing to economize, and he had, as he said, contemplated "pigging it by rail." Now, however, the thought of being able to do things comfortably put him in such good humour that he could not find it in his heart to be ungenerous, and he told Lilian to order herself some new frocks forthwith. She obeyed without hesitation and without gratitude, being well aware that he liked her to be handsomely dressed, and having a suspicion that he even felt something of the complacency of ownership in watching the attentions of which she was the object.

If he did he had his reward, for no one was more universally admired on the first day of the meeting than the beautiful Mrs. Jerome, nor were there many ladies present who received such trustworthy information from competent authorities as to the probable results of the racing. She had a few bets—not that she cared much either for sport or for gambling, but that it seemed a pity to disappoint those who had shown themselves so eager to oblige her—and she won her money. Leonard also, following her lead, speculated successfully; so it was in a mood of radiant good-will towards all mankind that he conducted her to the paddock, late in the afternoon, to inspect the horses.

On their way thither they were overtaken by two gentlemen who wore the long, unbuttoned frockcoats and carried over their arms the crook-handled umbrellas of the period. One man in his London clothes looks so like another that they did not at first recognize the urbane individual who took off his hat and said with cheerful familiarity, "Here we are again!" But Lilian's chin was raised and her eyelids dropped before he had time to state who he was; while Leonard, with a sudden vision of a dimly-lighted sitting-room in Palermo and an irate lady who declared that nothing on earth would

induce her to speak to a certain person again, responded somewhat less cordially than was his wont,—

“Oh yes; Mr. Frere, of course. I beg your pardon; I didn’t know you were in England.”

“Home on leave of absence,” answered Spencer tranquilly. “Arabella prefers to remain abroad for the present. We were sorry you had to bolt off from Sicily in such a hurry. You came back to fight the Wilverton election; didn’t you?”

“And to lose it,” said Leonard.

“Well, it wasn’t much of a loss, I should think. How any man can want to be in the House of Commons is a mystery to me—hard work, no pay, and precious little sport, by all accounts. However, I believe, there are a good many men in the House who don’t want to be there—eh, Vawdrey? Let me introduce my friend Captain Vawdrey—or perhaps I ought to say Mr. Vawdrey, now that he has chucked the service.”

Spencer’s friend, who had been gazing at Mrs. Jerome in undisguised and open-mouthed admiration, accompanied his bow with an ingenuous blush. He was evidently a gentleman, and, with his fresh complexion, his slight fair moustache, and his slim figure, might have passed very well for a subaltern in the Guards. He was, however, some years older than he looked, and was now, as Lilian presently ascertained from him, a full-blown M.P. She walked on towards the paddock with him, being determined to hold no parley with the offensive Spencer, who was apparently not to be shaken off; and she found him, notwithstanding a little preliminary shyness, very chatty, unaffected, and communicative.

“Legislation isn’t much in my line,” he told her, “but I was obliged to go in for it when my poor old governor died last winter, and when I succeeded to the property. My mother wished it, and as he had held the seat for I don’t know how many years, they let me in without a contest. It’s a funny thing that such a number of square pegs get shoved into round holes,

isn't it? Lots of fellows would give their ears to be eldest sons, whereas I should have been as happy as possible with a pretty good allowance and my commission."

"You were in the army, then?" asked Lilian.

"Yes, in the 22nd Lancers. That's how I came to be acquainted with poor Frere."

"Oh, he was a brother-officer of yours, was he?" said Lilian. She could not help adding, "I should never have supposed so; he doesn't *look* like it."

"How do you mean? He wasn't an officer, of course; he enlisted. But I believe he would have got his commission after a bit, if it hadn't been for an unfortunate row which spoilt his chance. His people have treated him awfully badly, you know."

"I don't know much about it; but I understood that he had treated them rather badly," Lilian said.

"Oh, well, I dare say he kicked over the traces in his youth; but it was hardish lines to cut him off with a shilling for that. He has had crushing luck, poor chap! That Mrs. Johnson who married him is—well, she ain't a very nice sort of woman, you know, and as far as I can make out they have had a split already. What is going to become of him I'm sure I don't know. I'm afraid you don't much like Frere, Mrs. Jerome," he added with a deprecating side-glance at his neighbour.

"I'm afraid I don't," answered Lilian, laughing, "and I doubt very much whether you would either if you were not too good-natured to dislike anybody."

She had taken a fancy to this boyish representative of his fellow-countrymen, who diffused an atmosphere of simplicity and kindness around him, and she thought it only right to warn him in a motherly way that friends of the type of Mr. Spencer Frere are apt to prove expensive companions to young men of fortune. But Mr. Vawdrey would not allow her to finish her sentence.

"Oh, I assure you I'm not such a fool as I look," he interrupted eagerly; "I know well enough that a rich man has got to harden his heart, and I've had one

or two rather sickening experiences already. But you're mistaken about Frere ; he doesn't belong to the parasite class. Of course I can understand what you object to : he has a nasty, swaggering sort of manner, and I wish he hadn't. Only I think some allowance ought to be made for a fellow who, after all, is a gentleman by birth, and who is always being treated as if he were a cad. I mean, if I were in his place I dare say I should be just as much inclined to snap my fingers in people's faces as he is."

"Well, you know Mr. Frere better than I do," said Lilian ; "perhaps you are right and I am wrong. Anyhow, we won't quarrel over it."

They did not quarrel at all ; on the contrary, they became remarkably good friends and exchanged many impressions, while Leonard and Spencer were watching the saddling of the favourite for the next race. Vawdrey, it appeared, occupied with some friends a small house close to that in which Lilian was staying ; he enjoyed the privilege of a slight acquaintanceship with her cousins, and he asked her diffidently whether she thought they would mind his looking in after the races on the morrow.

"It isn't so much that I care about seeing them ; but I should like to meet *you* again, Mrs. Jerome, if you would let me," he explained with delightful candour.

"And I should like very much to meet you again," Lilian returned ; "only I hope you won't think it necessary to bring Mr. Frere with you."

"Oh, he is going back to town to-night," the young man answered ; "I met him on the course an hour or two ago and gave him some lunch, that was all. I wish I could give him something more substantial than lunch, for I'm afraid he is hard put to it for a job, poor beggar ! Perhaps I may be able to lend him a hand later on though ; we shall see."

One of the many gentlemen who delighted to honour Mrs. Jerome with their attentions coming up at this moment, Mr. Vawdrey fell back, and she saw no more

of him ; but she ascertained in the course of the evening that he had recently come into a fine property in Lincolnshire, that he was both liked and esteemed by all who knew him, and that he was considered to be one of the most eligible young bachelors of the year. Leonard also spoke of him in appreciative terms, mentioning that he had asked him to call in Hans Place. Lilian was glad to hear that, for her new acquaintance (whom she inwardly described as "a nice, healthy-minded boy") had refreshed her with his simple talk, and if she wanted a friend, she wanted still more somebody who could take her out of herself for half an hour at a time.

However, she did not come across him on the race-course the next day—which, unfortunately, proved a disastrous one for her husband. Leonard had never been much of a betting man ; but just now he was sadly in need of ready money, and, having won a little on the opening events of the meeting, he was tempted to follow his luck. The consequence was that he incurred somewhat heavy losses, and drove away from the scene of his discomfiture silent and gloomy. It was a pity that he found some disagreeable letters awaiting his perusal on his return, and it was an even greater pity that Lilian, seeing him moodily smoking a cigarette in the garden, with his hands behind his back, should have selected that opportunity of joining him and carelessly handing him over a sheaf of bills which the post had brought her. He snatched them roughly out of her hand, glanced over them, and gave utterance to an exclamation of disgust which, to tell the truth, was both profane and unrefined.

"Well, now look here, Lil," said he ; "we really must come to some understanding about this sort of thing. I'm not a millionaire, and if such bills as these are to be handed over to me for payment, I shall precious soon be a bankrupt. Anything more preposterous than your dressmaker's charges I never heard of in my life !"

"I thought you wished me to employ a good dressmaker," she answered coldly. "Of course, when one does that one has to pay for it ; but I would very much

rather that you made me a fixed allowance. Then I could undertake to keep within it."

He had not yet made this customary arrangement, partly because he did not know what sum in respect of pin-money would be considered reasonable by a woman who went so much into society as Lilian did, and partly because he was growing more and more averse to the payment of ready money at stated intervals; but he felt that she was putting him in the wrong, and was therefore the more provoked with her.

"I don't remember your ever having asked me to give you a fixed allowance," he said; "probably it wouldn't have made much difference if I had. I am sure I have told you often enough what I think ought to be ample for household expenses, but the bills generally come to nearly double that amount."

"I dare say I am a bad manager," answered Lilian. "All I can say is that if I knew how much I had to dress upon I could dress accordingly. The best manager in the world couldn't promise that the weekly bills should be kept down to a certain amount without knowing how many people were to be asked to dinner in the course of the week."

Leonard sighed impatiently.

"Where there's a will there's a way," he remarked. "It's easy enough to accuse me of stinginess; but really I don't think I ought to be expected to be my own housekeeper."

The outrageous injustice of this speech was too much for Lilian's temper.

"You put words into my mouth which I have never used or thought of using!" she exclaimed. "Do you want to pick a quarrel with me? If so, you might surely hit upon some more plausible means of doing it."

"No doubt I might," answered Leonard bitterly; "but, as it happens, I don't want to quarrel; I prefer a quiet life. I only wish you to understand, once for all, that I can't afford to spend what you ask me to spend on your dress."

Lilian had an angry but entirely justifiable retort on the tip of her tongue. Before she could utter it, however, a deferential cough behind her caused her to turn her head, and thus she found herself face to face with Mr. Vawdrey, whose approaching footsteps across the lawn had been unheard either by her or by her husband. That the young man had been an unintentional eaves-dropper was made only too evident by his concerned countenance. He stood with his hat in his hand, looking so distressed and so foolish that Lilian could not help laughing, while Leonard said,—

“Oh, how are you? Very good of you to look us up. I'm afraid I must leave Mrs. Jerome to entertain you, because I have some letters to write before the post goes, but I dare say you'll be coming into the house presently.”

CHAPTER XXXII.

AN INTERRUPTION.

LILIAN continued to laugh after Leonard had so unceremoniously turned his back on their visitor.

"You see what lies before you," she remarked. "I suppose married people always squabble, and I suppose that in nine cases out of ten it is the same subject that starts the squabbles."

"Oh, I'm not going to marry for a long time, if I can help it," was Mr. Vawdrey's prompt reply. "I'd very much rather not—though my mother and the girls seem to be determined that I shall."

"Ah, then, you won't be able to help it. But never mind; it doesn't follow that you will have my husband's bad luck."

"I only wish there were the faintest hope of my ever having his extraordinary good luck!" the young man declared with fervour.

"Thank you; but I don't see how you can tell whether his luck is good or bad. At any rate, you know from what you overheard just now that he finds a wife an expensive luxury."

"I'm awfully sorry that I stole upon you like that," Mr. Vawdrey answered penitently; "I'm always doing these stupid, clumsy things. As for what I overheard, all I can say is——"

"No, don't!" interrupted Lilian, holding up her hand to check him. "I know exactly what you were going to say, and I assure you it would give me no sort of satisfaction to be told that I was in the right by a person who couldn't possibly judge. As a matter of fact, there isn't much excuse for me, because I was not at all well off before my marriage, and I ought to know how to econo-

mize. All husbands are cross when they are asked to pay their wives' bills ; you will be just the same."

"I don't think I shall," he returned quietly ; and Lilian quite understood what he meant. Remonstrances might, in the opinion of this unprejudiced gentleman, be permissible, but not such a tone as Leonard had seen fit to adopt. "However, I'm not married yet !" he added, setting his teeth in a resolute fashion which caused her laughter to break out afresh.

In truth she found it very necessary to laugh, being a good deal more inclined to do the contrary. Hers was not a nature to pardon injustice readily, nor could she regard her husband's language as being what in reality it was—a mere petulant outbreak, provoked rather than originated by her so-called extravagances. She thought just what she had said, that he wanted to pick a quarrel with her, and she was certain that if anything of his former love for her had remained he could not have spoken as he had done. For the moment, therefore, she was chiefly anxious to escape from the memory of these miserable dissensions, and as she strolled over the smooth sward with her companion she contrived in some measure to accomplish that object.

For Vawdrey was really a delightful companion—would have been delightful under any circumstances, and was especially so just now, when she thirsted for the society of some fellow-creature whose views of life were less stereotyped than those of the class into which she had been thrown against her will. He did not care about fashionable folks, he told her ; he had a modest craving for adventure, and would have liked to be sent on active service to India or Africa. But since that could not be, and since the House of Commons claimed him for its own, all he could hope for was an occasional sporting trip to distant lands during the winter.

"Not that I shall be allowed to absent myself for long at a time," he added ruefully ; "there's the property to be looked after, you see, and one's insatiable constituents to be addressed. My mother says I must stick

to my duties, whether I like them or not—which is right enough, I suppose. I wonder what you would think of my mother. Most people call her rather alarming, but she's the kindest-hearted woman that ever breathed, really. My sisters are countrified sort of girls; but then I like that sort best—don't you?"

"Do I look as if I liked that sort best?" asked Lilian, smiling.

"No, I'm not sure that you do exactly; but it's easy to see that you don't like artificial things or people. I think one can generally tell whether one will get on with a person or not, and I knew before I had been talking to you five minutes yesterday that we should be friends—that is, if you would let me."

Lilian was not at all disposed to refuse this frankly-proffered friendship. There was just enough of admiration in the young fellow's eyes to be flattering, without being in the least disquieting, and it was a rest and relief to talk to a man whose aims were honest and honourable. In return for his confidences, she told him a good deal more about her life, past and present, than she was in the habit of mentioning to her usual associates, and she could see that he divined and sympathized with much that she did not mention. By the time that some of the other people who were staying in the house had sauntered out and joined them, it had been agreed that Mr. Vawdrey should find his way to Hans Place as soon as might be. Meanwhile, he promised that he would look out for her on the course the next day.

He kept his promise; but it was in vain that he searched high and low for the lady by whom he had been so greatly fascinated, and who at the moment when the Ascot Cup was being won and lost was far away from him both in body and mind. A blow which may fall at any time is as startling when it does fall as though it had never been anticipated, and the telegram which summoned Lilian to her mother's deathbed stunned and dazed her, obliterating the memory of all

recent incidents. Leonard did not accompany her to London. He had offered to do so, and had said everything that was kind and sympathetic ; but, either because he wished to keep his wife's spirits up, or because he did not wish to lose a day's racing, or possibly from a combination of both motives, he had declared his conviction that this would prove to be a false alarm. So she had begged him to remain where he was, and had set off by herself, with the unconvincing speeches whereby he had attempted to reassure her still ringing in her ears.

"Her ladyship is sinking fast," Lady Sara's maid had telegraphed ; but this, as Leonard pointed out, had been said more than once before, and servants always make the worst of things. Lilian tried to hope during the journey, which she accomplished in an agony of impatience, owing to the many delays occasioned by the crowded state of the line ; but she felt sure that the end had come at last, and that she would never vex the most indulgent of mothers by her waywardness again. Her mother had not always understood her, and of late there had been something of an unacknowledged estrangement between them ; but who had been to blame for these things ? Lilian, in her sorrow and remorse, took the entire blame upon herself ; it may be that the larger share of it did in truth belong to her.

When at length she reached the small and somewhat airless lodging which had been taken for Lady Sara, her worst fears received instant confirmation. The doctor who had been called in was leaving the house as she drew up, and he turned back to tell Mrs. Jerome that there was absolutely nothing more to be done. He mentioned the nature of the attack, adding that it might have been, and he believed had been, surmounted, but that the patient had not strength enough left to rally.

"We must be thankful that there is little or no pain, and that the end, which cannot be many hours distant, will be a peaceful one," he said with a furtive glance at his watch.

"Oh, I have no doubt you have done all in your

power," answered Lilian hurriedly, "but she has been as bad—quite as bad as this before—once at Wilverton; and there was a doctor there, Mr. Austin, who saved her. May I not telegraph for Mr. Austin?"

"My dear lady," replied the physician in charge of the case, "if it will give you the slightest comfort to telegraph for any one, by all means do so; only it is my duty to tell you that Mr. Austin will be brought to London upon a fruitless errand. Pray, act as you please in the matter, however. I myself am obliged to leave you now; but I will return in the course of an hour or two."

Lilian dispatched her telegram; it was a forlorn hope, but she could not bring herself to resign it. Then she went into the sickroom, and then she knew for certain that she was in the presence of approaching death.

Lady Sara was still alive, and she recognized Lilian with the faintest of faint smiles; but all power of speech seemed to have left her, and her breath was drawn in long, irregular gasps. She had been like that since early morning, the nurse said, adding aloud, with the unconscious callousness which those to whom death scenes are familiar often display, "The wonder is that she has lasted so long."

Lilian, after begging the attendants to leave her, knelt down by the bedside and took her mother's cold hand in both her own. There were many things which she wished to say, and she tried to say them; but it was difficult to tell how much or how little the dying woman understood of those self-accusations and entreaties for forgiveness. She was, at any rate, unable to respond, save by an occasional feeble pressure of the fingers. Twice she struggled to speak; but the result was only a hoarse, unintelligible whisper; and after a time Lilian, fearing to distress her, fell back into silence.

Thus hour after hour passed slowly away. The incessant roar of the traffic outside; the hot, vitiated air which rose in puffs through the open window, blowing the blind inwards; the drone of an Italian organ round the corner; and, as the afternoon wore on, the shrill cries

of the newspaper boys, announcing the latest telegrams with the list of winners—all these things served as a continuous, relentless background for Lilian's miserable musings. To the world at large it is absolutely of no consequence whatever whether we are well or ill, living or dead. No reflection can be more trite ; yet there are few which, at certain times, strike us as more sad or more strange. Do what we will, we cannot realize our own insignificance until it is brought home to us in some commonplace, convincing fashion ; and somehow or other it hurt Lilian more to hear two butcher boys exchanging jocular repartees on the doorstep than to remember, as she did every now and then, that Leonard was amusing himself on Ascot Heath.

It was not much or often that she thought of Leonard. What was vividly present to her mind was an epitome—so far as she was able to form one—of the life which was now drawing to its close. Constant physical suffering, struggles to keep up a decent appearance upon insufficient means, secret anxieties which had been hinted at every now and then—there seemed to have been very little else in poor Lady Sara's existence, as her daughter had known it. But there had been no grumbling or repining, no selfishness, no lack of such sympathy as she had had it in her power to give. Doubtless there are not a few highly venerated personages whose record is less creditable and whose reward has been more apparent. Lady Sara Murray had been what is called worldly, circumstances having rendered her so, just as circumstances have rendered certain other people what is called religious. She had, however, tried to do her duty according to her conception of it, and it may be hoped that certain other people can say as much for themselves. Lilian, for one, did not feel entitled to make any such boast. She had indeed loved her mother, but she had not been guided by her ; she had always taken her own way, and of late—so it seemed to her—she had viewed with cold indifference the loneliness to which that uncomplaining mother had been condemned.

From time to time the nurse looked in, and, after a quick, professional glance, retired; between five and six o'clock the doctor reappeared, said a few words, suggested to Mrs. Jerome that she should take a little refreshment, and then went away, promising to call again later.

"There is scarcely any pulse," the nurse remarked, after his departure; "I don't think it can be long now. But really you had better let me bring you a cup of tea, ma'am."

Lilian shook her head.

"I don't want anything, thank you," she answered. "I will call you when—when you are needed."

It was about an hour after this that Lady Sara stirred uneasily. She seemed to be trying to raise her head; her eyes were opened wide; there was an eager, appealing look upon her pinched features; and Lilian, gathering that she wished to say something, stooped over her. In long gasps, with a break between each, the words came,—

"Very good to me—kiss me, dear—God bless you." Then there was something incoherent about "temptation," and then, with a supreme effort and in clearer accents, "But never leave him, dear—never leave your husband, whatever happens! Promise!"

The promise was given, and the anxious mother's eyes closed for the last time upon a world in which she had not played a prominent part, and from which she would be missed for a while by one human being only. Perhaps she had seen and known more than she had cared to talk about; perhaps her old dread of the family tendencies had never been quite allayed; in either case, she had up to the last done what in her lay to preserve her daughter from misfortune.

When Matthew Austin arrived, late that night, he was received by Leonard, who had come up from Ascot and who seemed surprised to see him.

"Unfortunately, I was not at home when Mrs. Jerome's telegram came," Matthew explained, "but I started as soon as I could. Am I in time to be of any use?"

Leonard shook his head.

"Oh, it's all over," he answered; "the whole thing has been very sudden, and I suppose Lil must have forgotten that she had telegraphed for you, for she said nothing to me about it. I'm very glad you have come though. Perhaps you may be able to do something with her. I can't. She won't leave her mother's room, and she'll hardly answer when she is spoken to. Of course it's awfully sad, and I'm very sorry for her and all that; still she ought to go home and get a little rest now—don't you think so?" Leonard was evidently smarting under a sense of ill-usage; and indeed he had lost more money that day, so that he was hardly in a fit frame of mind to cope with feminine unreasonableness. He added with a self-pitying sigh, "I've had no dinner yet," and he was quite willing to commit the management of a delicate task to his more experienced friend, who said,—

"Go away and get your dinner then; I'll look after Mrs. Jerome. I think you will have to let her stay here to-night if she wants to do so, but we will get her home in the morning. I will give her a sleeping draught if necessary."

"Has he gone?" was the first question that Lilian put to Matthew, whom she did not recognize until she had stared frowningly at him for a minute; and on receiving an affirmative reply, she drew a long breath of relief. "He has been saying such horrible things to me!" she murmured. And then, after passing her hand across her forehead, "He means to be kind, but he doesn't seem to understand that I *can't* leave her. You understand."

Matthew understood well enough; but it was only by the exercise of a good deal of patience and finally by the assertion of medical authority that he could induce her to quit the room where her mother's body lay. Then she had to be forced to eat and drink, which was no easy matter; nor was it until he had spoken so sharply to her as to bring the tears into her eyes that she would obey the orders which he felt constrained to give. Having

once yielded, however, she became suddenly and pathetically docile, and from that moment he had no further trouble with her.

He was obliged to go back to Wilverton the next morning; but he contrived to return before nightfall, and he stayed with the Jeromes until after the funeral, looking after all details for them and making himself useful in such a quiet, matter-of-course way that it seemed scarcely necessary to thank him.

"No wonder they call you the medicine-man!" Leonard said, with a half-compunctious laugh, when all had been done that could be done; "you certainly have a most amazing faculty for taking burdens off other people's shoulders, and making rough places smooth, and looking as if you liked it all the time. I suppose the fact is that you do like it. It's a dangerous reputation to have acquired though. You may depend upon it that if ever I find myself in a hole I shall come straight to you."

"I sincerely hope you will," Matthew answered. "But at the same time I hope you will try to keep out of holes."

He knew that his friend was not too well off, and, careless though he himself was about money matters, he could not help seeing that the household in Hans Place was not being managed upon economical principles. Lilian, too, had let fall some casual remarks which had led him to fear that there might be trouble in store for her and her husband. For the rest, he did not suspect the existence of any breach between them, while the resentment which he had not unnaturally harboured against his former love had become greatly softened both by compassion for her in her sorrow and by her behaviour to him, which had reverted very nearly to what it had been in her childish days.

"Mamma would be pleased if she knew how kind you have been to me," was her parting speech. "I don't think I could ever have got through these dreadful days without you; and now that you are going, I feel as if—as if there was nobody."

"Is Leonard nobody?" asked Matthew with a smile.

"Leonard hardly knew my mother and never cared for her; there was no reason why he should. She was nothing to him except an old lady, who was in bad health and who could not be expected to live long. Perhaps she would have been nothing more than a rather interesting patient to you, if you were like other people; but then you are like nobody else. I often wish that you were different in some ways."

"In what ways?" inquired Matthew, who had no idea of her meaning.

"I shall only seem impertinent if I tell you; but— isn't it rather a pity *never* to think of yourself? You lose all sorts of things that you might have, and you don't seem to mind. Yet you *must* mind; and not one person in a hundred realizes that pure unselfishness is at the bottom of it all." She paused for a moment before adding abruptly: "Why should you let Sir William Baxendale push you aside? It doesn't follow that you do other people a service every time that you efface yourself."

She turned away, without allowing him time to make any rejoinder, and as he got into his hansom it occurred to him that her words admitted of more than one interpretation. The allusion to Miss Frere was an old story; he was scarcely disconcerted by it; but could she mean that he had rendered her no service when he had retired in Leonard Jerome's favour? If she did, there might be worse troubles awaiting her than those pecuniary ones which he foresaw.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

RETIREMENT.

"IT just depends upon how one looks at things," remarked Leonard. "For my part, I can't see the use of moping; and if you'll excuse my reminding you of it, Lil, you owe something to the living as well as to the dead."

This was some weeks after Lady Sara's funeral, and as Lilian had not stirred out of the house since that melancholy day, her husband was surely entitled to remonstrate with her. He himself, it is true, had not been required to share his wife's seclusion and had begun to go about again as usual; still it was depressing, when he did come home, to find that mournful, tacitly-accusing figure always seated in the same chair. He thought, too, that if she had been alive to a sense of her duties, she would have noticed how worried he often was, and would have tried, as a good wife should, to cheer him up a little. Lilian, on the other hand, was of opinion that he might at least have made some show of sympathizing with her in her grief, even though it was so obviously out of his power to participate in it.

"I don't know what you want me to do," she answered wearily; "I can't give or accept invitations, and I don't suppose you would care to walk about the streets with me. I wish we could go to Stanwick!"

"Well, we shall go there when the time comes," returned Leonard impatiently. "As we have got to pay the rent for this house, it seems to me that we may as well occupy it until the end of our term. Besides, you wouldn't find Stanwick, with nobody staying in the house, much more cheerful than London, I'm afraid."

There might have been a reconciliation between the

couple, and perhaps it was as much Lilian's fault as Leonard's that nothing of the sort had taken place. She meant to do her duty ; her mother's last words had produced a strong impression upon her, and if she had been less fond of the man, she would probably have found it much easier to forgive his heartlessness. But she loved him still, and she knew that he was not what she had taken him for, and fifty times a day he made her wince by speeches which had never been intended to have that effect. Therefore she answered him coldly, driving him to seek oblivion of his money troubles elsewhere ; so that their estrangement became chronic. He concluded the present discussion, which lasted a few minutes longer, by saying,—

“ You must do as you please ; but I should have thought that, for your own sake, it would be better not to shut your door against everybody. Yesterday I met Vawdrey, who was very anxious to look us up ; but I was obliged to tell him that there wouldn't be the slightest use in his calling.”

“ I shouldn't mind seeing Mr. Vawdrey,” said Lilian ; “ if you meet him again, you can tell him so. He doesn't know me well enough to say the maddening things which old friends would be sure to say. I will see the old friends too, if you will let me wait just a little longer. After all, my shutting myself up doesn't prevent *you* from seeing as many people as you like.”

A few days later Mr. Vawdrey presented himself while Leonard was out, and his brief visit gave Lilian the first pleasant quarter of an hour that she had spent since their last meeting. He was rather shy at first, being evidently in doubt as to whether he ought to mention her loss or not ; but having made up his mind to do so, he spoke with such direct simplicity and was so unaffectedly sorry for her that she found it not only possible but comforting to talk with him upon the subject.

“ Yes, I know ; I expect that is what everybody feels,” he said in answer to one remark of hers ; “ I felt just the same about my poor old governor. I wasn't as good

a son to him as I ought to have been; more than once I went larking off with other fellows when I might have spent my leave at home. But, after all, I'm sure he forgave me; and you may depend upon it that your mother forgave you. That is if she had really anything to forgive."

"Oh, she had a great deal to forgive," said Lilian sadly. "I shouldn't feel quite such a wretch if I didn't see now how unselfish she always was with me. At the time I took it all as a right. Indeed, I often used to think I was behaving admirably by giving way to her, when she only wished to do the best she could for me."

Vawdrey nodded.

"Yes, that's where the shoe pinches," he agreed. "But I sometimes say to myself when I'm dead sick of sitting in the House that anyhow I'm carrying out the old man's wishes, though it's too late for him to know. It isn't much, but it's something; and I dare say you might do the same in a different sort of way."

This homely method of consolation appealed to Lilian, who had not been left in ignorance of her mother's wishes, and it certainly did not occur to her that the holding of confidential intercourse with an unattached member of the other sex was a somewhat odd fashion of giving effect to them. Vawdrey was not an admirer; or if he was so, he was an admirer *pour le bon motif*. It refreshed her to look at his honest face and listen to his honest talk, and this species of refreshment was dealt out to her in the sequel with no niggardly hand. He found his way to Hans Place as often as his duty to his country, his constituents, and the Parliamentary whips would allow him, and his visits soon became the one bright feature in Lilian's solitary existence. Leonard, too, liked the man, with whom he had many tastes in common; so that when the master of the house chanced to be dining at home on Sunday evening (which did not occur every week), it was generally arranged that Mr. Vawdrey should be present in the character of that third person who does not under all circumstances spoil company.

It cannot, however, be said that Vawdrey entertained any sentiments of amity for his host. He had by no means forgotten certain words of which he had been an unwilling hearer at Ascot, nor could he help noticing, with suppressed wrath, what he considered Jerome's ostentatious neglect of his wife. A fellow wasn't bound, of course, to mourn very profoundly for his mother-in-law; but it was scarcely decent to go about like that within a few weeks of a family bereavement; besides which, there was something almost insulting, as well as cruel, in the contrast between Jerome's present mode of life and that led by Mrs. Jerome. This was Vawdrey's view, and sometimes he had much ado to restrain himself from giving utterance to it.

On one occasion he was obliged to rise and leave the house abruptly, fearing lest, if he stayed five minutes longer, he might say things which would have the effect of bringing his acquaintance with the Jeromes to a premature close. It was a mere trifle—in such cases it always is—that caused the smouldering animosity between the husband and wife, which ordinarily found expression rather in distant civility than in open dissension, to break for a moment into flame. Leonard had mentioned that a certain magnate, whose castle was situated in the neighbourhood of Stanwick, was in the habit of holding a cricket-week every summer in his park, with accompanying festivities in the shape of dances and theatricals.

"I suppose," he added, "we may as well ask some people to stay with us then; it's about the only time in the course of the year when we shall be able to hold out the faintest prospect of amusement to them.—I wish you would join the gay throng, Vawdrey, if you haven't anything better for the first week of August. We shall be giving a dance ourselves, most likely."

"We can't do that," said Lilian quietly but decisively.

"I think we shall have to do it," Leonard returned, a slight flush rising to his cheeks. "The other people in the county are sure to entertain us pretty freely as

soon as we go home, and we must make some acknowledgment. Why do you say that we can't?"

"Only because I am in deep mourning. You forgot that, I suppose, when you spoke of our being entertained. Of course I shall have to decline all invitations."

Leonard was a good-tempered man; but his temper had been subjected to severe trials of late, and it must be owned that her tone was not conciliatory.

"May I ask," he inquired, "how long you propose to keep up this sort of thing?" Receiving no answer, he went on with increased irritation. "It is quite out of date, you know—this smothering yourself up in crape and refusing to be seen. Nobody does it nowadays; it's ridiculous and inconvenient, and it isn't any real proof of sorrow. I take it that we are not more heartless than the last generation, only perhaps we're a little less hypocritical."

"I don't think I am a hypocrite," said Lilian; "as for being ridiculous, I dare say I can bear that. I am sorry to put you to inconvenience, but I am afraid I can't help it. My being in mourning hasn't inconvenienced you very much so far, you must admit."

"Well, I can't say that you seem to me to have studied my convenience, or anybody's except your own."

He would have proceeded to speak a good deal more strongly, had he not, in the nick of time, become alive to the circumstance that a juvenile member of Parliament was staring at him with eyes of amazed apprehension. A vulgar conjugal row in the presence of an outsider was inadmissible, much though he wished to get his breath out; so he broke off with a laugh, saying,—

"Well, never mind.—But I put it to you, Vawdrey, as a reasonable being—if she can manage to talk cheerfully with a friend like yourself, oughtn't she to be able just to exchange a few observations and eat her dinner in the company of some country neighbours who may be bores, but who will have to be put up with sooner or later?"

It was at this juncture that Mr. Vawdrey had to seize

his hat, stammer out something incoherent about an appointment, and take to his heels. He would have liked to invite his friend Jerome to accompany him to some quiet spot, take off his coat and roll up his sleeves; but that fashion of intimating to a fellow-creature that he does not possess your esteem cannot be resorted to in highly-civilized communities, nor could society hold together for a single day if a man were permitted to say just what he thought.

What Mr. Vawdrey thought was that Mrs. Jerome's husband was a downright brute; so it was as well that he had self-control enough to say nothing. It would have been better also if he had abstained from saying anything a few days after, when he found Lilian alone; but since she chose to ask his opinion as to whether it was her duty to entertain and be entertained in those northern latitudes whither she was shortly to be transported, he was fain to reply, with some warmth,—

“I don't know so much about your duty, but I haven't a doubt about Jerome's. A man's first duty is to his wife, and he has no business to ask you to do what would make you miserable.”

“I suppose he doesn't believe that it would make me miserable,” said Lilian.

“Then he ought to believe it. The truth is that what he had the imp—that what he said the other day about you ought to have been said about himself: he studies nobody's convenience except his own.”

Whatever the reciprocal duties of a husband and wife may be, it is certain that neither should discuss the other's character with a third person. Lilian being sensible of this, administered the gentle rebuke which the occasion called for and changed the subject. But she shared Vawdrey's opinion all the same.

“What has become of your friend Mr. Frere?” she asked, merely by way of starting the conversation again, and because he looked too crestfallen to undertake that task for himself. “Is he still in England, or has he joined his wife at some foreign watering-place?”

"Oh, he's in England," answered Vawdrey, laughing in an embarrassed and deprecating way. "In point of fact, he's doing secretary for me just now."

"Dear me! Is your correspondence so large that you require a secretary?"

"Well, there really are a lot of letters; you've no idea what a lot of letters a man gets when he's in Parliament. Of course I don't mean to say that Frere hasn't rather an easy berth of it; but he said he didn't mind taking it as a stop-gap, and it may lead to something better."

"I should think he would be in no hurry to make a change. Probably you give him a large salary."

"No, indeed; only just enough to keep him——"

"Honest?"

"Ah! you're too hard upon him. Frere is a much better chap than you think, and I dare say he's much better than I should be if I had been through what he has. His wife offered to allow him three hundred a year, upon the condition that he lived away from her; but he wouldn't take it. He said he preferred to shift for himself."

"Meaning that he preferred to let you shift for him."

"Of course you can put it in that way, if you choose," answered Vawdrey, looking distressed, for he had mentally idealized Lilian, and he did not like to hear her say spiteful things; "but it was before I offered him the secretaryship that he refused to touch her money. I suppose I mightn't bring him here some day, might I?"

"I can't honestly say that I should enjoy seeing him," answered Lilian; "but it doesn't much matter, because he won't want to come. I doubt whether he likes me any better than I like him."

It appeared, however, that Spencer was, for some reason or other, desirous of renewing acquaintance with the lady who had given him so little encouragement. Accordingly, he paid his respects one afternoon; and if Lilian, upon closer scrutiny, was unable to discern any good points about the man, she had to acknowledge that his manners were no longer objectionable. He sat,

with his hat between his knees, watching and listening, but only speaking when he was spoken to; and although something was said about Wilverton, he refrained from mentioning Matthew Austin's name. Only, as he walked away, he remarked laconically to his friend and patron,—

“There will be a row in that house soon, you'll see. You know your own business best; but I wouldn't be mixed up in it if I were you.”

“I certainly shall not be mixed up in it in the way that you mean,” answered Vawdrey rather sharply. Then he asked, with a touch of anxiety, “Why do you say that there will be a row? Are people talking about it?”

“Oh, it's notorious,” answered Spencer, a good deal of whose leisure time was spent in listening to gossip which had passed through the lips of many informants before it reached him, “that our good friends Mr. and Mrs. Jerome are two. Let us hope that they will arrange matters without troubling the President of the Divorce Court.”

The circumstance to which he alluded really was, in a restricted sense, notorious. “People”—that is to say, the people who knew the Jeromes—had been mildly scandalized earlier in the season, and now saw their previous suspicions confirmed by Leonard's frequent appearances amongst them without his wife. It was all very well, they shrewdly remarked, to say that her retirement was due to her mother's recent death, but that did not explain her refusal to admit visitors. It was, therefore, necessary to suggest or invent explanations, some of which even found their way to a point as far distant from the gay world as Wilverton.

It was Mr. Litton who first communicated current reports to Matthew.

“Leonard's marriage seems to be turning out very much as might have been anticipated,” was the old man's comment upon what he had heard. “They tell me that he is to blame, and I can well believe it; but I shall be very much surprised if it does not turn out that

she has been to blame also. What else could he expect of a woman who had already shown herself to be as shameless as she was fickle? Excuse my employing the adjectives that belong to her; I would not do so if I did not feel sure that you had quite got over your former weakness in that quarter."

"Nevertheless, I would rather that you did not apply those adjectives to Mrs. Jerome," Matthew returned; "to the best of my belief they don't belong to her. If there is really anything like a serious quarrel—but that will prove to have been an exaggeration, I hope—the cause probably is that he cannot feel as she does about poor Lady Sara's death. What you tell me as to his being seen everywhere without her sounds as if that might be it."

"It sounds to me a good deal more as if they were tired of one another already," Mr. Litton remarked. "As for Lady Sara, the chances are that he doesn't treat her memory with any great respect; for she left next to nothing, I understand—which must have been a disappointment to him. But, whatever may be the matter, it is evident that he and his wife are repenting at their leisure of what they did in haste. A time may even come when he will repent of having made me look foolish by losing an election which a very little exertion would have enabled him to win. Meanwhile, possession is nine points of the law, and it will be a hard matter to get the seat back now that Baxendale has secured it."

Mr. Litton was not a very ardent politician; but he had been mortified by the discomfiture of the party to which he belonged, and he was so determined to fix all responsibility for that discomfiture upon his nephew that Matthew had ceased to take up the cudgels on Leonard's behalf. What the old man wanted now was contrition and submission; it was not unlikely that he would get what he wanted ere long, Matthew thought, though it seemed extremely unlikely that Sir William Baxendale would be unseated at the next general election.

The successful candidate had departed for Park Lane,

where he resided when in London, without having taken any steps towards altering his widowed condition. That much Matthew had ascertained ; but Mrs. Frere, who had been his informant, did not seem to be at all discouraged.

“ He will be coming home again in the summer,” she said cheerfully, “ and then we shall see. Really, when one comes to think of it, it’s almost impossible that Anne should refuse him. In some cases, of course, one can’t feel sure ; but that is when there has been somebody else. Now, there never was anybody else in her case, because we have never been able to give her the chance, poor dear ! ”

Matthew was too honest to say that he hoped Mrs. Frere’s wishes might be fulfilled, although he could not but acknowledge that they were very natural and excusable wishes for a mother to entertain. There are, however, many events, desirable in the abstract, at the accomplishment of which one does not care to assist in the character of a spectator, and as the slack season had now set in, Matthew decided somewhat suddenly to go off to Switzerland for a well-earned holiday. Somehow or other, he was growing a little tired of Wilverton, and as he stepped into the train he told himself that it would do him good to turn his back upon the place for a season.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

LILIAN AS A HOSTESS.

"CHEERFUL, isn't it?" said Leonard. "Jolly sort of place to live in all the year round."

He was standing after breakfast by one of the high, narrow windows of the Stanwick Hall dining-room, and it must be confessed that the rain-enshrouded landscape before him looked sufficiently dreary to justify the lugubrious air with which he regarded it.

"But it isn't always like this, I suppose," answered Lilian, rising from the table and drawing a little nearer to him.

"Oh, not always; sometimes there is snow, and more often there are black north-easters. But the sky is always grey, and the trees always present the appearance of having had their back hair combed over their eyes, and the general aspect of things is always one of forlorn solitude. To be sure, you have developed a taste for solitude.

If she had, he did not mean her to gratify it more than he could help. They had arrived from London on the previous day, having remained there until the fag-end of the season, and the first batch of guests who had been prevailed upon to visit them in their remote home was expected for the morrow.

"What are we going to do with them? That's the question," said Leonard despondingly. "There will be the cricket, of course, if they care to look on at it—which they probably won't—and there will be the dance and the theatricals at the Castle; but, upon my word, it's almost brutal to ask people to stay with you when you aren't allowed even to invite a few friends to meet them at dinner."

Lilian conceded the dinner—"half a dozen dinners if

you like"—but as she drew the line at a ball, her concession earned her scanty gratitude. She was strongly of opinion that she would have been within her right had she declined to receive anybody, while Leonard was just as strongly of opinion that her chief wish was to thwart him; so that they spent a sufficiently unhappy day, and were not sorry to be delivered from one another's chilling politeness by the advent of their guests.

These, as Leonard himself confessed, were "a mixed lot." It is not everybody who is ready to jump at an invitation to a country house in the extreme north-east corner of England at a time of year when plenty of pleasanter quarters are obtainable, and the Papillons had to be included in the list, with a deprecatory shrug on the part of their host. Not that Lilian objected to the Papillons, or that there was any occasion to offer apologies for them. The days had gone by when the languishing glances, or even the risky remarks of a lady who belonged to the extinct class of professional beauties had had power to make Mrs. Jerome's blood boil. It was almost amusing, it certainly was not in the least distressing, to watch her little coquetries and catch fragments of the reproaches which she was pleased to address to one who had begun by admiring and had subsequently neglected her. Mrs. Papillon or another—what did it signify, since Leonard evidently found it essential to his comfort that there should be somebody? Indeed, the woman was not much, if at all, more uncongenial than her companions of both sexes, whose appetites had to be satisfied and whose requirements had to be studied as far as an insufficient staff of servants would allow.

Lilian was not brilliantly successful as a hostess; no doubt it would have been impossible for her to be so without a far larger supply of horses and ready money than could be accorded to her, and her husband might have remembered that. However, he only saw that she did not like his friends, that she played her part in a laborious, perfunctory way, that she offered no suggestions for their entertainment, and that the culinary

arrangements were defective. Having no head for details, he never took into account the small daily worries by which she was beset, nor did he give her credit for working hard—as she actually was doing—to battle with them. He thought himself a real good fellow because he refrained from uttering the remonstrances which were upon the tip of his tongue.

Not many of us, it is to be feared, would have the audacity to describe ourselves as real good fellows if we only knew what the other real good fellows are in the habit of saying about us; and Mr. Vawdrey, for one, was by no means disposed to confer that title upon a host who welcomed him heartily. Vawdrey arrived one evening, in response to the invitation which he had received, and drove up from the station in company with Lady Bannock, who had contrived to spare a few days to her brother on her way north. Perhaps her ladyship's affectionate eulogies of "poor, dear Leonard" did not please her fellow-traveller; at any rate he could not resist saying that, however dear Jerome might be, Mrs. Jerome seemed to him to be the more deserving of compassion of the two. Consequently, Lady Bannock received a disagreeable impression of Mr. Vawdrey, which was confirmed by her subsequent observation of him.

Yet he did not behave at all badly. If Lilian was glad to see him, if her voice softened and her face brightened up when he spoke to her, if he preferred staying at home with her to looking on at third-class cricket with the rest of the house-party, and if he was sometimes a little short in his replies to Leonard, these were surely very slight foundations upon which to ground a whole superstructure of scandalous suspicion. But Lady Bannock had never liked either her brother's marriage or his wife; so that she was scarcely an unprejudiced spectator of incidents which seemed to cause no disquietude to her brother himself. She believed Lilian to be a confirmed flirt, she had her doubts as to the morality of any member of the luckless Kingsbridge family, and she saw—as indeed

nobody could well help seeing—that the Jeromes had ceased to be a devoted couple.

“Bother that doctor-man!” this really kind-hearted lady was provoked into muttering under her breath; “why on earth couldn’t he insist upon his rights when he had them? I was sorry for him at the time, I remember, but I am a great deal more sorry for Leonard now.”

She was determined to be sorry for Leonard, who, nevertheless, seemed to be pretty well satisfied with his present lot. The weather became fine; he found that, after all, there was something to do every day; Mrs. Papillon amused him, and it was a relief to him to hear Lilian laugh again every now and then. Since Vawdrey alone appeared to have the gift of making her laugh, there was cause for thankfulness in the fact that Vawdrey seemed inclined to prolong his visit. He was also quite pleased with his wife and grateful to her for consenting to join a picnic expedition to Radworth, a little fishing-village on the coast, where there were sands and cliffs and a view over the grey expanse of the North Sea, which people who admired nature under her most sombre aspects had been heard to praise. Radworth was not, to tell the truth, a particularly attractive spot; still, with lobster mayonnaise, champagne, and Mrs. Papillon in the foreground and a clear sky overhead, it answered his purpose fairly well.

Lady Bannock opined that it was answering Lilian’s purpose into the bargain when she saw her hostess and Mr. Vawdrey stroll off together towards the dilapidated old church on the heights above the harbour, after partaking of a very moderate amount of refreshment. But, as a matter of fact, Lilian’s thoughts were not for the moment occupied with her companion, nor was she listening to his remarks.

“Do you want to see that church?” she asked suddenly, addressing him for the first time, as soon as they had reached the summit of the acclivity. “There are some ancient brasses in it, I believe; but one brass is

exactly the same as another to me, and I should think it was to you too."

"I could die contentedly without ever setting eyes upon another brass, ancient or modern; I want to do just what you want to do, that's all," the young man replied, with his customary willingness to oblige.

"Oh, I only wanted to get away," said Lilian, as she seated herself upon the short, crisp turf and drew her knees up to her chin. "It seems to me," she added presently, "as if the rest of my life would probably be spent in wanting to get away."

"It's an abominable shame that you can't!" burst out Vawdrey, replying rather to the despairing look upon her face than to her somewhat imprudent words.

There had been many previous talks between them during which she had sometimes spoken quite as unadvisedly, and had been answered after a fashion for which Vawdrey had taken himself to task in his cooler moments. He did not wish her to leave her husband; he knew very well that such a step as that must needs prove more disastrous for her than living on in the most uncongenial of homes; yet he could not endure to see her suffering, and it occasionally struck him—as it is apt to strike a good many people—that some means ought to be devised of annulling unhappy marriages by mutual consent. However, she did not seem to have understood him.

"I don't know that there is any shame about it," she answered indifferently; "it's unlucky if you like. Most people could get away, because most people have heaps of relations whom they could go and stay with; but I am badly provided for in that respect. Besides, it's my duty to remain at home and entertain visitors, I suppose."

"I wonder whether you could be persuaded to come and stay with my people for a bit!" exclaimed the young fellow eagerly. "We wouldn't have anybody else in the house, and you could do just what you liked, you know, and—and it's rather a pretty place. My mother and the girls would be awfully glad to see you."

"I am not so sure of that," returned Lilian, shaking her

head and laughing a little. "No; thank you very much for thinking of it, but I am afraid I couldn't take advantage of your invitation. Besides, you forget my visitors. I wish," she concluded with a reflective sigh, "that I didn't dislike them so much!"

"As if you could help disliking them—*some* of them, anyhow!"

Lilian turned her head to glance inquiringly at him, for the vehemence and bitterness of his intonation surprised her.

"Ought I to have a special detestation for any individual among them?" she asked. "You mean Mrs. Papillon, perhaps; but really I don't much mind Mrs. Papillon now, though I used to mind her once upon a time. She isn't a very alarming rival."

"That's hardly the question, is it? In one sense such a woman couldn't possibly be your rival; it would be ridiculous to mention you in the same breath. But in another sense any scullery-maid might be."

Never before had Vawdrey ventured to use such unequivocal language, although the fact of Lilian's domestic unhappiness had not been concealed from him. The chilling rejoinder which he now received warned him that he had gone too far.

"I haven't reached the point of selecting ugly scullery-maids yet," she said. "Some women do, I believe; but it is not very easy to understand why they should think it worth while. Suppose we change the subject. How are you getting on with your constituents? Are you preparing to address them at great length and at short intervals during the recess?"

Vawdrey sighed and tried not to look as crestfallen as he felt.

"Oh yes," he answered; "my mother is a Primrose League Dame, and we are to have a big *al fresco* entertainment in the park soon, at which I shall have to stand on a platform and spout with the other long-winded nonentities of the district. Sack-races and Ethiopian minstrels and plenty of buns and tea may make some amends, one

hopes. The disheartening part of the whole business is that not one in a thousand of the voters cares a brass farthing about his country, and we can't appeal to their cupidity, because we have no absurd impossibilities to offer them as the Radicals have. I've worked hard to get up the subject of agriculture, and I think I know something about it now; but I've nothing to say except the truth, and they don't like that. Frere tells me I might at least hold my tongue; only the mischief of it is that I ain't allowed to hold my tongue."

"I dare say you will learn, though Mr. Frere, as far as my experience of him goes, is not much in the habit of practising what he preaches," remarked Lilian. "You still cling to your secretary then?"

"Yes, and I find him more and more useful. I sometimes wish we could change places, for he has ten times my brains, and he seems to be interested in politics, which I hate. I suppose it's a cowardly view to take, but it seems to me that, since we Tories are beaten, we might as well say so and throw up the sponge at once, instead of attempting to outbid the other side. As we're in the right, why shouldn't we stand aside until the nation finds out by experience that it has been duped, and calls us back?"

But this gallant effort to comply with Lilian's behests and divert the conversation into a safer channel met with no success. When two people are thinking of one and the same thing, it is next door to impossible for them to avoid mentioning it for any length of time; and Lilian, whose indifference to her country's weal was, it is to be feared, almost as complete and as reprehensible as that of the agricultural labourer, ended by reverting to the topic which she herself had banished from the field of discussion.

"One talks of wanting to get away," she remarked, *à propos* of nothing at all and without any pretence of having been interested in her companion's dissertation upon the advance of democracy, "but it isn't so much from other people that one wants to get away as from one's self. How is that to be done?"

It is to be done in many different ways ; but possibly Vawdrey was acquainted with none of these, for, instead of answering her question, he said decisively,—

“ You wouldn’t want to get away from yourself unless there was somebody from whom you wanted to escape. And I’m sure I don’t wonder that you should ! ”

Lilian was staring out over the brink of the cliff at the sands beneath, where Leonard and Mrs. Papillon could be seen, engaged in the exciting pastime of throwing stones at a bottle.

“ I suppose you mean my husband,” she said composedly.

“ I beg your pardon. I oughtn’t to have said it, of course ; but—— ”

“ Oh, I don’t mind ; you know us well enough now to know what the state of the case is, and I am not afraid of your repeating anything that I may say to you. All the same, I was not thinking of Leonard ; he has as much reason to complain of me as I have of him. Only I can’t help being dull and stupid and a wet blanket. I wonder whether I shall always go on like this, or whether I shall change all of a sudden, as I have often done before. If I do, the change isn’t likely to be for the better. My mother always used to be in terror lest I should end badly.”

The above sentences were uttered with a pause between each, and were evidently fragments of an unspoken soliloquy. Lilian was gazing at the misty horizon line, where the pale blue sky met the grey sea ; she seemed to have forgotten her neighbour, and did not even turn her head when he exclaimed impetuously,—

“ I wish you wouldn’t talk like that ! It sounds as if you didn’t care what became of you.”

“ Why should I ? ” she returned ; “ nobody else does. My mother cared ; but she is dead now, and I don’t believe that dead people can see what is going on in this world. It would be too miserable for them if they could.”

“ Well, I can answer for it that there is one living

person, anyhow, who cares a great deal for you," Vawdrey declared.

A tremor in his voice caused her to withdraw her eyes abruptly from the distant prospect and fix them upon the countenance of the speaker. It is a fact that until that moment she had never suspected the existence of what was plainly legible there, and the discovery was not a welcome one to her. On the other hand, she was not greatly shocked or perturbed by it, having become inured to similar discoveries. Disappointment and regret at the loss of a friend were the sole sentiments of which she was conscious as she rose to her feet, saying quietly,—

"Isn't it nearly time for you to be going back home?"

"Home?—to Stanwick, do you mean?" he asked.

"Well, I suppose we shall be going back to Stanwick presently," she replied with a faint smile; "but I meant that you had better return soon to your mother and your Primrose League meetings and all the rest of it. Don't you think so yourself?"

A quick flush overspread his cheeks and faded away, leaving him rather pale. Perhaps it was not Lilian alone who had made a discovery during the past few minutes. However, he answered without hesitation and in a matter-of-fact tone of voice,—

"Yes, I expect the Primrose Leaguers will be clamouring for me; I'll be off by the first train to-morrow morning."

There was no occasion to say more: they understood one another, and they knew that their pleasant intimacy must cease. For the moment they were not sorry to be intruded upon by Lady Bannock, who had breasted the hill in search of them, and who drew their attention somewhat acrimoniously to the church clock. No further opportunity for private converse fell to their lot that day; only on the following morning Vawdrey found that Lilian had come downstairs to superintend his early breakfast, and when she bade him farewell she asked him to write to her sometimes.

"Friendships can't be kept up by post," she remarked;

"still I don't want you to forget me immediately, and I should like to hear how you get on. You might let me know of any important occurrence in your life—such as your marriage, for instance, which seems to be inevitable."

"I shall never marry," he answered decisively; but he could not trust himself to give reasons for that positive statement, and he was driven away from Stanwick to the accompaniment of the incredulous laughter which it merited.

As for Lady Bannock, she breathed more freely as soon as she heard of Mr. Vawdrey's departure.

"If I were you I wouldn't have that young man in the house again," she had the indiscretion to say to her brother. "It may be all right, but with some people one can never feel quite certain, and Lilian is so—shall we say odd?"

"We will call her odd if you like," answered Leonard with an impatient laugh; "she can't be called even, anyhow. I'm sure I don't know from one day to another how she will take things. For my own part, I'm only too glad to have anybody in the house whom she doesn't hate; but it looks to me as if we should soon have no house to put anybody in. If Uncle Richard persists in living and in buttoning up his pockets, I shall be broke before long."

Several speeches of this kind had already been made to Lady Bannock, whose husband, although a rich man, was extremely unlikely to see the propriety of supporting her relations, so she hastened to effect her escape.

"There ought to be a son and heir," she said querulously as she left the room; "that would set everything right. Why isn't there a son and heir?"

Indeed, it seemed to this good lady that Mrs. Leonard Jerome had shown herself deficient in all the qualities which a wife ought to possess.

CHAPTER XXXV.

LEONARD PAYS HIS FRIEND A COMPLIMENT.

THE woods round about Wilverton had already discarded the monotonous dark green of late summer for the yellow and brown and russet tints of autumn when Matthew Austin returned from a holiday which had lasted somewhat longer than he had originally intended it to do. Among the less-frequented valleys of the Alps he had found what he had started in search of: he had become bitten with a taste for mountaineering on an unambitious scale; his *locum tenens* had assured him that there was no occasion to hurry back, and by the time that he reached home once more he flattered himself that he was both physically and mentally a healthier man than when he had set forth on his travels.

He was, to be sure, a singularly lonely man; but then he had never in reality been anything else, and there are worse evils than solitude. At the same time, when one has no immediate belongings to care for or worry about, one naturally feels a keener interest in the destinies of one's acquaintances; so that Matthew was not a little anxious to hear the latest intelligence from Hayes Park. He betook himself thither two days after his arrival, and was received by Mrs. Frere, who at once announced that she had no news of importance to give him. Sir William Baxendale, it appeared, had gone off to Homburg at the end of the session, instead of spending the summer at home, and had since been disporting himself at various pleasure-resorts upon the Continent.

"However, he is expected shortly," Mrs. Frere said; "and Emma corresponds regularly with Anne, which, I think, is a hopeful sign. Of course, one can't expect a man of his age to be impetuous; though I am sure he

wouldn't keep me in this uncomfortable state of suspense if he only knew how much I want to get him settled and done for. Anne? Oh, she just jogs along as usual—anxious and troubled about many things, I am afraid, but not much about poor dear Sir William, as far as I can judge. Anxieties and troubles are unavoidable; but one should try to forget them when one can. I only wish I could persuade George to forget his!" Mrs. Frere paused for a moment, sighed, and then resumed: "I know you have heard something about our eldest son. I never like to mention him, because it is such a painful subject, but sometimes I can't help wondering whether it might not be possible to give him one more chance. He has quarrelled with that vulgar wife of his, we hear, and now he is private secretary to a Mr. Vawdrey, who is a man of property and a member of Parliament. I should have thought that sounded like a desire to become respectable; but George won't see that there is any merit in his having separated himself from the woman—which of course there isn't, in one sense—only, as we never could have received her—— However," concluded Mrs. Frere, in her customary philosophical way, "things often turn out better than one ventures to expect."

Matthew said something commonplace. He was rather shy of talking about Spencer, having still a certain sore feeling as to the manner in which his interference with the affairs of the family scapegrace had been received, and he was glad when Mrs. Frere at once rambled off into doubts whether Harry ought not to be recalled from India, in order to take his place as heir-presumptive.

"Not that there will be much of an inheritance for him to succeed to, poor boy! The only thing is that, if we had him upon the spot, one might possibly find an heiress for him. I suppose you don't happen to know of any young woman who is a lady and not bad-looking and has a few thousands a year of her own? Of course you don't, though; there are no such young women nowadays, except Americans. After all, an American

might do, if she didn't insist upon a title. They are most of them pretty, you know, and some are clever, and I hear that their relations give very little trouble. Then the next thing will be to establish Maggie, who is growing up faster even than the weeds in my poor garden. What is to become of Dick I can't think. George says we shall all be upon the parish before we die ; but I tell him that a good dose of colchicum would drive all those dismal notions out of his head. By the way, what do you think of colchicum ? They say it is an old-fashioned remedy which is coming into use again, and that numbers of gouty people have been relieved by it."

Matthew did not lend a very attentive ear to these and other disconnected remarks. He lingered on, in the hope that Anne might come in ; but he had to take his leave at last, and it was with a slight sense of disappointment that he rose to say good-bye. Upon the doorstep, however, it was his good fortune to meet the predestined Lady Baxendale, who mentioned that she had just returned from a walk, and was kind enough to add that she was glad to see him back again. She was looking remarkably handsome, he thought, her walk having given her a colour ; she was also very cheerful and amiable, insisting upon a circumstantial account of his wanderings, to which she listened with much apparent interest. Yet, somehow or other, she was no longer the Anne Frere whom he had met for the first time nearly two years before, and he was not at all sure that he did not prefer her old uncertain moods to her present determined politeness.

"I suppose you know about Spencer," she said at length, conquering a visible reluctance to introduce that topic.

"I only know what your mother told me just now—that he had left his wife, and that he is acting as private secretary to somebody," Matthew answered.

"To Mr. Vawdrey. I thought perhaps you might have heard of him from the Jeromes. Mr. Vawdrey is a great friend of Mrs. Jerome's, I believe," said Anne.

and it struck Matthew that there was something rather odd about the voice in which this statement was made.

He glanced interrogatively at the speaker ; but as she volunteered nothing further, he merely remarked,—

“ I don’t correspond with the Jeromes. All is well with them, I hope ? ”

“ Oh, I don’t correspond with them either,” answered Anne. “ Yes, I believe they are quite well. Spencer sometimes mentions them in his letters.”

“ You do correspond with him then ? ”

“ He has written several times lately. No ; not to ask for money ; he says the salary that Mr. Vawdrey gives him is quite as much as he wants, and he is taking nothing from his wife. I think he is really fond of me, and he always speaks most warmly and gratefully of you.”

“ He doesn’t owe me anything,” said Matthew.

“ He thinks that he owes you a great deal—which of course is the truth.”

There was a short interval of silence, after which Anne exclaimed, as if involuntarily,—

“ I wish I could believe him ! ”

“ But can’t you ? ”

“ Not quite. I am afraid he only writes as he does, and talks about having turned over a new leaf, because he thinks I shall show his letters to my father or my mother. For the time being he seems to be going on steadily, but I daren’t hope that it will last. Don’t you think it is great nonsense to say that there can be no such thing as love without respect ? ”

“ Well, yes ; I think it is rather nonsense,” answered Matthew reflectively. “ Judging by my own sensations and experience, I should say that it was quite possible to love a person for whom it was not possible to feel any great respect.”

Anne made a quick gesture of irritation.

“ I don’t think a *man* ought to feel like that,” she returned ; “ it seems to me a little beneath him. A woman’s case is altogether different.”

Then, perceiving that Matthew was somewhat sur-

prised at being attacked for having agreed with her, she added impatiently,—

“Oh, well, it can’t be helped. Men and women, we are what we are, and there is no more to be said about it.”

He went away with the impression that she had been going to say something more, but that he had unintentionally checked or chilled her. Not for the first time since he had endeavoured to play the part of a friend to Anne Frere was this annoying conviction brought home to him, and it made him more impatient with her than he was wont to be with the failings of his fellow-mortals. For the rest, if she had been going to consult him as to the feasibility of Spencer’s reinstatement, he could not have helped her. He knew that if he himself had been afflicted with a son like Spencer, he would have forgiven the man until seventy times seven ; but he was not at all prepared to assert that such a course would be expedient, and, in any event, the matter was one for Mr. Frere’s decision.

After this he saw very little more of Anne. The daily routine of his work soon claimed him again ; nobody being ill at Hayes Park, he had not the time to turn his horse’s head in that direction, and it was only through Mrs. Jennings that he learned every now and then, as the weeks passed on, how Sir William Baxendale had returned, how large shooting-parties were being held at the Priory, and how assiduously Anne was helping Miss Baxendale to entertain her brother’s guests.

“Quite as if she were one of the family already!” the charitable creature said. “I am sure nobody will rejoice more sincerely than I shall if the Freres succeed ; but it does seem rather imprudent to fling their daughter at the poor man’s head as they are doing. Enough to frighten him out of the county again—which would be a very great pity.”

Mrs. Jennings, who knew everything, also knew, and stated that she had heard with the deepest regret, what a terrible mistake young Jerome’s hasty marriage was turning out. For her own part, she made a point of never

judging anybody until the worst had been proved beyond a doubt, but she feared it was only too true that Mrs. Jerome had been encouraging admirers—notably, a young man named Vawdrey, who had recently succeeded to large estates, and who had been staying at Stanwick Hall.

“You may imagine what a sad trouble this is to poor old Mr. Litton in his precarious state of health. Dr. Jennings doubts whether he would survive the disgrace of an open scandal.”

One of the disadvantages of being an open scandal-monger is that, after having earned that reputation, you are not very likely to be believed even when you tell the truth; and Matthew, who saw the old recluse at the Grange pretty constantly, was sure that, if there had been any ground for Mrs. Jennings's assertions, he would have heard of it. As a matter of fact, Mr. Litton seldom alluded to his nephew, except to make some sardonic remark as to the probability of his being requested ere long to pay the latter's bills; while he disliked Lilian so much that, had he known anything against her, he assuredly would not have failed to mention it. Matthew, therefore, saw no reason for believing that time had avenged him upon the supplanter who never ceased to be his friend, and to whom he wished nothing but good.

The first frosts of winter were hardening the ground and bringing down the withered leaves in showers when he was abruptly reminded that there are two ways of wishing your friends well, and that the practical method is apt to be a very inconvenient one. Returning home late and weary one evening, he was surprised to hear that Mr. Jerome had been for two hours awaiting him in his study, and the words of welcome with which he hurried into the room died away upon his lips at the sight of his visitor's haggard countenance.

“My dear fellow, what is the matter?” he exclaimed.

“I'm glad I look as if something was the matter,” answered Leonard gloomily, while he took the other's outstretched hand; “it saves introductory remarks—

and goodness knows I *ought* to look pretty bad ! Do you remember my telling you, the last time we met, that if ever I got into a hole, I should come straight to you ? Well, here I am ; and the long and short of it is that, unless you can help me out of this hole—which seems almost impossible—I shall have the bailiffs upon me before Christmas."

" Oh, it's only money, then ? " said Matthew with a sigh of relief.

" Only money ! Why, what would the man have ? Oh, I see what you are thinking about. Well, yes ; since I am making a clean breast of it, I may as well confess at once that Lilian and I are not candidates for the Dunmow fitch. We haven't got on quite as well as we might have done ; I think her rather unreasonable and I dare say she thinks me rather unfeeling. You may have heard something about it, perhaps. But things will go more smoothly after a bit, if only I can manage to keep my head above water. If I can't, Heaven only knows what will happen ! "

He was a little ashamed of himself, but a good deal more sorry for himself. He related how he had been drawn into unforeseen expenditure, not stating in so many words, but allowing it to be inferred, that his wife had cost him a good deal more money than an economical manager would have done ; he owned that he had been silly enough to back horses, and that he had been even more ill-advised in endeavouring to recover his losses through speculations on the Stock Exchange ; finally, he asked Matthew, as a reasonable, sensible man, what the dickens he was to do.

" The Jews are no good ; I've raised all I can on mortgages, and it's impossible to give them the security they ask for. As for applying to Uncle Richard, that would be simply suicidal. I know as well as possible what he would do : he would pay up, cut me out of his will, and wish me good-morning. There's Bannock, who isn't a bad fellow ; but he would see me jolly well hanged before he would lend me as much as I must have if I'm

to tide over another year. So, you see, it just comes to this: if you're enough of a Cræsus to advance me the amount you'll be the salvation of me, and you won't really run any risk to speak of. I shall be able to pay you back with interest as soon as the old man dies, and he is failing fast. You must have noticed that yourself."

"What is the amount?" asked Matthew.

"I know you think me rather a brute for talking in this way; but I should be an utter humbug if I pretended to have any affection for my uncle. He is only glad to see me now because he is rubbing his hands with glee at the thought that I have come to ask for money. If you can be fond of a man who exults over you when you are in trouble, I can't. I shall be rich when he dies; I want very badly to be rich, and I no more want his society than he wants mine. You must remember that he has never been a bit like a father to me, and that he has never shown me the slightest kindness or sympathy in my life."

"I can understand your having no great love for Mr. Litton," said Matthew. "My own belief is that he is much fonder of you than you suppose or than he cares to show; but never mind that now. The question is whether I can help you. How much do you require?"

Leonard heaved a profound sigh.

"My dear old man," he answered, "if you can't manage it without putting yourself to great inconvenience, you mustn't mind saying so. It does sound a lot; but I'm afraid it must be that or nothing. The only thing is that of course you may get it back again within a few months, and you're quite certain of getting it back soon."

"Unless your uncle disinherits you," observed Matthew, smiling. "But would you mind telling me how much it is?"

Leonard paused for a moment before replying to this third query. Then, with the air of one who gulps down a dose of castor-oil, he brought out his answer.

"It's—it's ten thousand pounds."

Matthew's jaw dropped.

"Ten thousand! I didn't think you would want so much as that."

"I don't see how I can do with less," answered Leonard sorrowfully; "I have had such ghastly bad luck! Even if I said eight thousand it wouldn't make much difference, I suppose."

"Not very much. Well, I must think it over, and I will let you know to-morrow whether it is in my power or not to raise so large a sum. You wouldn't allow me to lay the whole case before your uncle and hear what he says about it, would you?"

"Not for the world! There can't be a shadow of a doubt that he would jump at that excuse for altering his will. As it is, he couldn't, with any sort of decency, disinherit me. I needn't tell you that we are going to cut down all unnecessary expenses. I shall let Stanwick again as soon as I can find a tenant, and we are looking out for a cheap little house in London. How my wife will stand poverty I'm sure I don't know; but we must hope that the ordeal won't last long. If you could by any possibility——"

"I will if I can," interrupted Matthew a little curtly. "More than that I cannot say just now. And indeed," he added, glancing at his watch and smiling again, "I haven't time to say more. Go away, and let me see you to-morrow about the same hour. No; I haven't earned any thanks yet, and I don't want any apologies. You pay me a compliment by coming to me in your trouble."

But Leonard, while he was being gently pushed towards the door, could not help ejaculating,—

"What a good fellow you are, Austin! I don't believe there ever has been such another good fellow since the world began!"

Evidently he already felt sure of his ten thousand pounds.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

A CHANGE OF QUARTERS.

TEN thousand pounds is a large sum of money either to lend or to give away, and all sensible men who have reached a certain age have learnt that what they cannot afford to give away they cannot afford to lend. Matthew Austin, who perhaps scarcely deserved to be called a sensible man, had at all events sense enough to know that much ; so he looked into his affairs with a view to ascertaining whether he could possibly come to his friend's rescue. He found that the requisite amount could be realized, a corresponding curtailment of his income being the necessary consequence ; he found also that he had hitherto, in his careless way, been living very nearly up to the edge of his income, and that he must live very differently henceforth, or else decline to assist a man who, when all was said, had absolutely no claim upon him. To count upon repayment within a year, or two years, or five years, would be obviously imprudent.

Now, whether it is prudent or imprudent, wise or unwise, to cripple your resources and incur extreme discomfort and inconvenience for the sake of somebody else is a question which every man must answer in accordance with his own ideas, and which, of course, depends very much upon the further question of who somebody else may be. That Matthew, in deciding, towards the small hours of the morning, to make a great sacrifice for the sake of Leonard Jerome, showed himself exceptionally foolish as well as exceptionally generous his biographer, for one, is not concerned to deny ; but he did so decide, and having made up his mind he cheerfully went to sleep. He was fond of Leonard, whom he had

always regarded as being to a large extent the victim of circumstances ; he could not help believing that the woman whom he had once loved had been chiefly to blame for the embarrassments of which he had been told ; he guessed that something worse than a pecuniary catastrophe might be the result of his refusal to assist the improvident couple ; and, after all, does not a lonely man get more personal satisfaction out of promoting the happiness of others than out of surrounding himself with luxuries which there is nobody to share ?

The upshot of these nocturnal reflections was that at an early hour the next morning Matthew called upon Mr. Robinson, the local house-agent, in order to make a proposition which was instantly and favourably received.

“ Oh dear me, no, sir !—not the smallest difficulty,” Mr. Robinson replied. “ With the place filling up as it is, we don’t ’ardly know where to turn for the accommodation we’re asked for. There was a party come in on’y yesterday afternoon—Mr. Cohen, a wealthy Jewish gentleman—as I believe your ’ouse would just suit. Invalid lady, no children—what I should term desirable tenants in all respects. I understand as he would bind himself for three months certain ; and leavin’ of the ’ouse, as you propose to do, sir, with plate, linen, and servants, I shouldn’t ’esitate for to ask fifteen guineas a week. I ’ope this don’t mean we’re going to lose you, though, Mr. Austin.”

“ No ; but for various reasons I think of taking lodgings for the rest of the winter,” answered Matthew ; and, after having given permission for Mr. Cohen to “ view the premises ” in the course of the afternoon, he went his way.

Within an hour from the time of his return home that evening the whole transaction had been completed. Mr. Cohen had come, had seen and had been conquered ; the lamentations and the amazed queries of the servants had been dealt with ; nothing remained to be done except to pack up. So simply and speedily can

the greatest changes be effected by one who knows his own mind and has only himself to consult.

But when Leonard, looking half expectant, half apprehensive, made his appearance, not a word was said to him upon the subject of the proposed flitting. It is not customary on making a present to state the exact price thereof to the recipient, nor had Matthew any inclination to confess how his heart sank at the thought of parting with his privacy, his snug library, his books, his pictures, and the garden that he loved. *Linquenda domus!* a persistent voice had been whispering in his ear all day. Though he had chosen to speak to the house-agent and the servants of vacating his present quarters for a few months only, he knew very well that his chances of returning thither in the spring were but small. Heedless as he was in matters of domestic economy, he had a horror of debt, and greatly preferred being uncomfortable to living beyond his means. At the same time, he thoroughly disliked being uncomfortable; besides which, he had grown attached to the pretty old house which he hardly expected ever to inhabit again. However, it would have been the extremity of bad taste to impart these melancholy anticipations to Leonard, whose gratitude was voluble, and who wished most particularly to be assured that he was not subjecting his preserver to even a temporary pinch.

"It's all right, my dear fellow," Matthew declared; "I would do a great deal more than this for you if I could. Only, since you are pleased to consider yourself beholden to me, I will ask two small favours of you by way of return."

"As many as you like!" answered Leonard generously.

"I'll limit myself to two. The first is that you will have patience with your uncle, who is trying, I admit, but who is fond of you at the bottom of his heart; the second is that you won't treat your wife with a show of indifference. If I know anything of her—but perhaps you will say that I don't know much—she has very strong

affections, and it would be better both for her and for you that she should be scolded than that she should be allowed to think you didn't care what she did. Now I have been impertinent enough, and I will say no more."

Leonard shrugged his shoulders.

"I can easily promise to be patient with Uncle Richard," he answered; "to the best of my knowledge and belief I have never been anything else. As for Lil—well, you may know her better than I do, but she doesn't strike me as being the sort of person who would stand much scolding. I have remonstrated with her once or twice upon the subject of expense, and the result was not encouraging. The fact is that she can't be happy without a grievance, and just now her grievance is that I haven't rent my clothes and heaped dust upon my head because poor old Lady Sara has joined the majority—which is really rather ridiculous. Women often are like that, you know; the only thing to be done with them is to let them alone until they recover themselves."

Matthew did not like to warn this easy-going husband that when women are denied sympathy in one quarter they are only too apt to seek it in another. It was not his business to stir up conjugal suspicions and dissensions, nor indeed was he acquainted with the rights of the case. He thought, not without reason, that he had done what in him lay to help them both; if he could be of any further use to either of them he would doubtless be informed of it.

Fortunately for Matthew, it had of late years become no uncommon thing for the Wilverton residents to turn an honest penny by letting their houses during the winter months. It was, to be sure, usual for those who adopted this plan to leave the place on being ousted from their several abodes; still a bachelor really does not require a whole house to himself, while a doctor cannot, of course, take a holiday at the busiest season of the year; so Mrs. Jennings and others had nothing much worse to say about Mr. Austin's removal to Lady Sara's former lodgings in Prospect Place than that the young man's prac-

tice was evidently not quite such a lucrative one as some people had seen fit to make out. But Mr. Litton at once smelt a rat.

"What does this mean, Austin?" he asked sharply one day. "You are not the man to turn yourself out of house and home for the sake of making a miserable little profit of a few guineas a week, and although you may be the sort of man to have lost money through some silly investment, I shall not believe that you have done that until you tell me that you have. Is it so?"

"Well, since you ask me," replied Matthew, who congratulated himself upon being able to tell the truth without letting the truth be known, "I have made an investment which, I am afraid, may involve the loss of the principal. If the worst comes to the worst I shall not be ruined; but I thought it prudent to economize, and as I had a good offer for my house I accepted it."

"H'm!—very laudable, that decision of yours, but rather sudden, wasn't it?" asked the old man, staring steadily at the other. "You seem to have formed it just about the time when I was honoured by a visit from my nephew, who gave me to understand that he also would have to practise economy. He came here with an uncommonly long face, and left with a cheerful one, though he got nothing out of me," added Mr. Litton, smiling grimly.

"If I were you I should give him money," said Matthew, ignoring the unspoken query. "Why don't you? You have more money than you can spend; you know it is a hard matter for him to pay his way; you mean, I presume, to leave your property to him; yet, instead of giving yourself the satisfaction of being thanked and of seeing other people enjoy themselves, you prefer to make them look forward to your death. It is very bad policy."

"Oh, he looks forward to my death, does he?"

"It stands to reason that he must; you would look forward to his if your positions were reversed."

"I suppose I should," agreed Mr. Litton with a sigh.

He had grown accustomed to Matthew's habit of frank speech, and now rather liked it. "Well," he resumed presently, "any one who is waiting for my death will not have to wait much longer; the finish is in sight now."

"I doubt whether you are as ill as you think you are," Matthew began; "if you would be advised by me——"

"Not for the world!" interrupted Mr. Litton; "please allow Jennings to kill me in his own way. My dear friend, wasn't it agreed between us at the outset that you should never be my medical adviser? And don't you know what the consequences are of mentioning one's medical adviser in one's will? I may want to leave you a trifle; and in point of fact I believe I shall—particularly now that I have heard of this unfortunate investment of yours."

"It wasn't exactly medical advice that I was going to offer you," answered Matthew, laughing. "As for mentioning me in your will, it is very kind and good of you to contemplate that; but I can say truthfully that I would rather have your society than any legacy. You called me your dear friend just now. That was a way of speaking, of course; still, we really are friends, and I don't think either you or I have so many friends in the world that we can afford to lose one."

"Ah, well, you will have to get on as best you can without me soon, and a modest legacy may help you to bear up under the affliction," returned Mr. Litton, who was probably a little touched, and therefore spoke the more dryly. "Rubbish about your having few friends! I never met a man who had more of them. I am very nearly, if not totally, friendless, I admit; but I have only myself to thank for that. The truth is that I have always known my fellow-mortals too well to make—'unfortunate investments' was the term that we selected, I think."

It was little enough that the poor old hermit knew about his fellow-mortals; but, like the generality of us, he plumed himself upon what he did not possess, and

it would have been a difficult task to persuade him that his judgment had been at fault with regard to his nephew. Matthew made no further effort in that direction, being indeed thankful to be spared awkward questions, and he noted with satisfaction that Mr. Litton had not denied the intention imputed to him of constituting Leonard his heir.

It was not long after this that, dropping in at the local pastry-cook's one day to swallow a hasty luncheon (for the landlady in Prospect Place had told him plainly that she could not put up with irregular hours), he was hailed by a couple of fresh young voices, and turned round to shake the extended hands of Dick and Maggie Frere, who were seated at a little round table, with hot jelly and buns before them. Dick had "gone into tails," and was quite a young man; so he thought it necessary to explain that he was treating his sister, whose juvenile taste for sweet things remained unimpaired. A re-criminatory wrangle followed; after which Matthew, who did not feel quite equal to hot jelly, but declared himself capable of eating buns against anybody, drew up a chair between his young friends and inquired how they all were at home.

"Oh, there has been a nice row in the house!" answered Dick with his mouth full. "What do you think of Anne's having refused old Baxendale?—Don't make faces at me, Maggie; you ain't good-looking enough to play tricks with your features, and the mater would have told Mr. Austin all about it if I hadn't.—Yes; the old boy proposed the other day, but she said it wasn't good enough, and, as you may imagine, her papa and mamma ain't best pleased with her. I'm not sure, you know," continued Dick judicially, "that, if I were Anne, I should be particularly keen about marrying a grey-headed old chap like Baxendale; still, she ought to consider her family, and, as the governor says, she needn't have raised our hopes all this time if she didn't mean business. No better covert-shooting in England, you know, unless it's in Norfolk."

"I've said all along," observed Maggie, "and I stick to it still, that Anne ought to have married Mr. Austin."

"How could she, you great silly, when he never asked her? Besides, what this family wants is hard cash. We ain't proud; we wouldn't turn up our noses at a retired pork-butcher now, if he had ten or twelve thousand a year to offer. However, there's no shutting our eyes to the fact that our dear Anne is no longer as young as she was. We shall soon have to look to you for salvation, Maggie."

"*I'm* not going to marry a pork-butcher; but if I did, I wouldn't give anything to a lazy boy like you, except a pound of sausages every now and then to stop his mouth," returned Maggie. "As soon as I am old enough I mean to propose to Mr. Austin; that will be the next best thing to having him for a brother-in-law."

"Let us regard the matter as settled, then, subject to the approval of your parents," said Matthew. "Any reparation that I can make for having disappointed you by failing to marry your sister——"

He stopped short in the middle of his sentence, looking extremely foolish; for Anne herself had stepped quietly into the shop while he had been speaking, and now stood at his elbow. She could not possibly have helped overhearing his ill-timed jocularities, nor could he do anything except stare at her in mute consternation. Dick and Maggie burst out into shouts of unfeeling laughter at the sight of their friend's discomfiture; but Anne's countenance betrayed neither anger nor amusement."

"Are you encouraging these young wretches to ruin their digestions?" she asked. "What an unprincipled thing for a doctor to do! I thought I should find them here, and I have come to carry them off home at once.—How much unwholesome food have you managed to consume between you, Dick?"

"Impossible to say upon the spur of the moment," answered Dick composedly; "Maggie is such a rapid feeder. But if you will give me ten shillings, my dear,

you shall have sixpence change, and I'll undertake to pay all expenses."

There was a little friendly dispute over the payment of the bill, during which Matthew, who insisted upon standing treat for the whole party, recovered his equanimity to some extent; but when he found himself out in the street with Anne, the others having rushed off to look on at an incipient dog-fight, he began to feel uncomfortable again. Nor was her first remark of a nature to set him more at his ease.

"I really think you ought to be ashamed of yourself," she said.

"Because of that nonsense that you heard me talking just now? I am very sorry; but I assure you it was only the feeblest of feeble jokes, and I should never——"

"Oh, I know," she interrupted. "I guessed at once what they had been telling you, and it never occurred to me for a moment to feel annoyed with you for answering Maggie according to her folly. What does make me feel annoyed with you is your having given up your pretty house and gone into stuffy lodgings in order to provide Mr. Jerome with ready money, which he will only squander. Why should it be more generous to do such things than to give half a crown to a tipsy loafer? And we are always being told how immoral it is to do that."

"But I can't admit that I have done anything of the sort," said Matthew, to whom this unexpected scolding was not altogether disagreeable.

"Of course you can't; still there is no doubt that you have done it. I have heard from Spencer, who knows how to put two and two together, and who perfectly understands why the Jeromes, who were upon the brink of ruin, have been able to make themselves comfortable in London again. If they were worth it I could keep my patience with you; but since they are not, and since you must be aware that they are not——"

"Does one stop to consider whether a drowning man's life is worth saving before one jumps into the water?" asked Matthew.

"You do admit having dragged Mr. Jerome out by the hair then? And do you suppose that he will ever thank you? I always told you that Spencer was not worth much; but I do think he is worth a good deal more than Mr. Jerome. At least he was and is grateful."

"Besides which, he promptly repaid me. Even if it were the case that I had advanced money to Jerome and had had to let my house for a time in consequence, I should be repaid in one form or another, and the sacrifice wouldn't be such a tremendous one as you imagine. It is my misfortune to be for ever appearing abnormally unselfish, when I am simply gratifying my own tastes in my own way."

"It would be impossible to convince me of that," answered Anne, shaking her head. "I know what it is to attempt self-sacrifice for the sake of others, and, as you have heard from the children, I know what it is to break down disgracefully at the last moment. Perhaps that is what makes me find you so exasperating. I was half inclined to read Spencer's letter to you, but I had better not. Since it makes no difference to you whether people are good or bad, grateful or ungrateful, you would hardly be influenced by anything that he might have to say about your friends. Only I do trust that you won't let them reduce you to beggary."

"I certainly won't do that," answered Matthew, laughing. "Meanwhile, please do not allow it to be supposed that there is the slightest ground for what you have been assuming as a fact."

"Oh, nobody in the place except myself suspects the truth, if that is what you mean, and nobody will be told by me. I like you too much to exhibit you in the light of—well, in the light in which ninety-nine people out of a hundred would regard your conduct."

Maggie and Dick returning at this moment in a high state of excitement, after having assisted in dragging the two pugnacious dogs apart, nothing further could be added, and Matthew had no opportunity of telling Miss

Frere how glad he had been to hear that she had held out against the fascinations of Sir William Baxendale. But he went his way, feeling more cheerful than he had done for a long time past. Anne, to be sure, had not been complimentary ; but she had spoken frankly and like a friend—which was more than she had done since his first somewhat unsuccessful efforts to befriend her.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE INTRUSIVE SECRETARY.

ALTHOUGH Lilian would not, for choice, have returned to the house in Hans Place which was connected with certain painful memories of hers, yet she was not sorry to find herself once more an inmate of that cosy dwelling ; for indeed she had been threatened with West Brompton or Maida Vale. That her husband had been unfortunate in his speculations she was aware ; but she had neither requested nor been furnished with particulars : all she knew was that Stanwick was to be let, that retrenchment was imperative, and that Mr. Litton had behaved like "a regular old brute." Notwithstanding this alleged avuncular brutality, Leonard had returned from his short visit to Wilverton in greatly improved spirits ; but it had not occurred to her to ascribe this change to Matthew Austin's munificence, of which she had naturally been kept in ignorance.

For her own part, she was perhaps a little less unhappy than she had been during the summer ; for there is nothing except physical suffering to which our mortal nature does not grow accustomed with time. The estrangement between her and her husband was now complete, and was accepted by each of them as a part of the normal condition of things ; they seldom quarrelled, and they did not see nearly as much of one another in London, where Leonard had his club to go to and his friends to meet, as they had done in the country. Lilian, too, had a few friends, whose society she no longer shirked ; so that their life, as far as its surface was concerned, flowed on smoothly enough through the early months of winter.

But soon after Parliament reassembled a slightly disturbing influence began to ruffle that outward placidity.

It was not that Leonard objected in the least to the reappearance of Mr. Vawdrey, whom, on the contrary, he was quite pleased to see again ; but Lilian was not free from doubt as to whether—knowing what she knew—she ought to receive him, and the young man himself was so embarrassed and diffident on the occasion of his first visit that she was very nearly asking him not to repeat it. To be sure, he had never made any open declaration ; and, in compliance with her request, he had written to her three or four times since his abrupt departure from Stanwick Hall—stiff little letters of the school-boy order of composition, in which a good deal had been said about politics and something about sport—letters which might safely have been read in the market-place. Still, since his feelings were evidently unchanged, it might possibly be her duty to be out when he called. All things considered, however, she decided against a course of action which, if adopted, would have deprived her of some pleasant hours. She was in no danger of losing her heart to this perfectly respectful adorer of hers ; she soon perceived that it was not his intention to take any advantage of her leniency, and the more she saw of him the better she liked him. As for him, since he was out of the nursery, she did not consider that she was bound to protect him against himself ; she had seen too many platonic and quasi-platonic friendships wax and wane to take a very tragic view of their possible results. Moreover, she believed, with reason, that Mr. Vawdrey had at least as much common sense as the general run of young men.

Thus it came to pass that in a few weeks' time he had re-established himself upon the old footing. He became as frequent a visitor as of yore ; he gradually dropped the apprehensive tone and the look of mute pleading for pardon which he had assumed at the outset ; he even permitted himself to hint, from time to time, at the deep sympathy which he felt for Lilian, whom he still regarded as an injured and neglected woman. He hinted at nothing more—or, at least, if he did, his hints were so discreet

and so faint that they might fairly be looked upon as unintentional.

It was not, therefore, his conduct nor her own, nor any fear as to the ultimate issue of either, that caused those ripples upon the even flow of Lilian's existence to which allusion has been made. What at first displeased and afterwards disquieted her was the persistence of Mr. Vawdrey's private secretary in calling at a house to which he had never been invited. That unwelcome personage was never without an excuse for following his chief to Hans Place, and he seldom failed to preface his request for instructions as to the correspondence which he brought in his hand with the remark of, "I thought I should find you here." This formula he would accompany with a smile of which Mrs. Jerome could not fail to understand the meaning.

"I wish," she said impatiently to Vawdrey one day, "that letters of importance didn't always reach you at such improbable hours! Wouldn't it save your time and Mr. Frere's to have them addressed to the House of Commons?"

"Well, it isn't only letters, you see," answered Vawdrey apologetically. "All sorts of things keep cropping up, and he is such a scrupulous fellow that he'll do nothing without precise orders."

"Yes, I should think he was very scrupulous," observed Lilian dryly; "still he might take some less inconvenient way of displaying his virtues."

"All right; I'll tell him not to come here again."

"Oh, you can't do that. It doesn't really matter; only he is rather a bore, and sometimes I think he goes about as near to being impertinent as he dares."

Vawdrey looked pained and surprised. He was quite sure that poor Frere did not mean to be impertinent; he regretted Mrs. Jerome's invincible prejudice against his *protégé*; nothing short of downright proof would have made him believe that Spencer was spying upon them both. But Lilian was under no illusion upon the subject, and if she had known how to make her manner

more distant and forbidding than it was when she poured out a cup of tea for the bland intruder, she would certainly have done so. The provoking part of it was that Spencer was evidently aware of her displeasure, and that he didn't care. There was a tacit enmity between them to which she gave expression as well as she could by supercilious disdain, while he, with considerably greater ingenuity and success, would make smiling insinuations of which it was impossible to take notice. It was not, however, until his fifth or sixth visit that a desire for variety prompted him to say something amiable about Matthew Austin and the latter's change of abode.

"From what my sister tells me, Austin must have been hit rather hard," he remarked; "a man doesn't leave a comfortable house and go into lodgings for pleasure. I wouldn't mind laying ten to one that the poor beggar has either been backing a bill for a friend or lending money which he doesn't expect ever to see again. I wonder which of his friends has lent him a helping hand on the road to ruin this time."

Lilian, pierced by a sudden, swift suspicion, set down her teacup and changed colour.

"Has Mr. Austin left his house?" she faltered. "I didn't know."

Spencer gazed steadily at her. "Is she telling a lie?" he thought. "She doesn't look as if she was, but of course she must be. Most likely it was she who sent her husband down to Wilverton at a time when, as everybody knew, he was all but broke. Most likely she is getting money out of Vawdrey now."

"I had no idea that Austin's having let his house for the winter would be news to you," he said aloud. "He is popularly supposed to be hard up in consequence of foolish speculations; but it is a good deal more probable, I should imagine, that somebody else has speculated foolishly. How odd that he should never have mentioned it in writing to your husband! But perhaps, as you are such friends, he was afraid of distressing you."

For two days Lilian kept her doubts and fears to

herself. What Spencer Frere had intended her to understand was obvious; still she clung to the hope that he had spoken as he had done out of sheer malevolence, and that she had been spared the crowning humiliation of being pecuniarily indebted to the man whose love she had at first accepted and had then thrown away. She dreaded, too, a scene with Leonard, who hated nothing so much as being questioned about the state of his affairs. Finally, she had a little of that cowardly inclination to shut her eyes in the presence of unwelcome facts to which few of us can pretend to be total strangers. So long as the shadow of a doubt exists, why should we not allow ourselves the benefit of it? But we always have to open our eyes eventually, and on the third day Lilian realized, as everybody must end by realizing, that however bad a thing certainty may be, it is more tolerable than suspense.

Leonard, for a wonder, was eating his luncheon at home. He lingered on to smoke a cigarette or two after the conclusion of that meal, and, being in a good humour, chatted pleasantly to his wife, without noticing her preoccupied mien. He was quite taken aback when she said abruptly,—

“I want to ask you something. You told me in the autumn, you know, that you had had losses, and that we should have to live in a very small way for some time to come. Then you took this house again, and money seemed to become plentiful. Where did it come from?”

“I really can’t undertake to explain business transactions which you wouldn’t understand even if they were explained to you,” answered Leonard, his face clouding over.

“I don’t want to hear anything about business transactions; all I want to know is whether you have borrowed money from Matthew Austin.”

“What put that idea into your head?” asked Leonard with a frown.

“He has let his house, and he is said to be in diffi-

culties. That man Frere told me about it the other day. Did you know that he had let his house?"

As a matter of fact, Leonard, who occasionally wrote to one of Mr. Litton's old servants in order to keep himself informed as to the condition of his uncle's health, had heard of the circumstance alluded to, and had been not a little provoked by it. Such ostentatious measures of precaution on Austin's part were surely uncalled for, seeing that in a few months' time his ten thousand pounds would be safely lodged at his banker's once more. That sort of conduct was just the sort of thing to set people chattering and guessing, and here was the disagreeable proof that it had had that effect. Really, Austin might have been a little more considerate.

"I suppose Austin is entitled to let his house if he likes," he replied curtly. "Perhaps you will even admit that I am entitled to manage my own affairs without being cross-examined about them."

"Ah, then it is true!" exclaimed Lilian, clasping her hands despairingly. "No; you are *not* entitled to manage your affairs in that way! How can you have fallen so low as to take money from him of all men in the world—and money which he could not spare too? Don't you understand that it is to me, not to you, that he is lending it? No; you are not entitled to degrade me as you have done!"

The retort was too easy and too obvious to be resisted.

"Your qualms of conscience do you credit, my dear," answered Leonard with a smile, "but I think you may safely dismiss them. If Austin was enamoured of you once upon a time—which I take leave to doubt—he has assuredly overcome that weakness now, and I have every reason to believe that he has a sincere liking for me, unworthy though I may be of his regard."

"Put it in that way if you choose," returned Lilian impatiently; "it makes no difference whether he has done this for you or for me."

"Oh, I thought your argument was that it made all the difference."

"I am not arguing; all I want you to see is that it is disgraceful for us to have reduced him to poverty in order that we may live comfortably. You yourself must feel that it is, and so must he. His being too generous to say so doesn't make our disgrace any the less. Oh, I wish I had married him!"

"Permit me respectfully to echo that wish," returned Leonard, whose face was white, and who, in truth, was very angry indeed. "As, however, you have made the mistake of marrying me, I must beg you to understand once for all that I claim to be master of my own actions. Of course you are talking absolute nonsense when you accuse me of having reduced Austin to poverty, and I take it that he would hardly have obliged me with a small loan, which I am sure of paying back within a few months, if he had been compelled to let his house on that account. But I don't consider myself in any way bound to plead guilty or not guilty to you. It seems pretty clear by this time that, whatever I do or leave undone, I shall never succeed in pleasing you; and as I allow you to take your own line, you had better allow me to take mine. If we can't be an affectionate couple, let us at least endeavour to treat one another with decent civility when we meet. I assure you that our meetings shall be as few as I can make them."

About two hours later Mr. Vawdrey, whom a swift hansom had brought from Westminster in time to beg for the cup of tea with which Mrs. Jerome was wont to refresh him when he could escape from his legislative functions, was thrown into a state of much mental agitation by the sight of Lilian's red and swollen eyelids.

"What has happened?" he asked anxiously. "Is it—has he——"

When the male friend of any married woman takes to speaking to her of her husband by the pronoun of the third person, it behoves her to consider whether friendship can be kept up any longer without peril; but Lilian was too full of her own woes to remember anything except that this good, honest, sympathetic fellow would

be upon her side if he knew the whole truth, and her inclination was strong to tell him the whole truth then and there. She stopped short of doing that, although it would have been scarcely more imprudent to state the facts than to answer as she did.

"He hasn't been beating me, if that is what you mean," she replied, laughing rather hysterically. "Only I don't feel as if I *could* go on living with him!"

Further questions failed to elicit anything much more definite than that from her; but Vawdrey felt convinced that she would never have said as much had she not been subjected to the most extreme provocation, and his wrath was equalled only by his sense of helplessness. What could he do or say to console her? There were several things which he would have dearly loved to say, and several which he would have rejoiced to do; but, for reasons which it would be superfluous to specify, one and all of them were inadmissible. As a matter of fact, he said very little and looked a good deal. Perhaps she understood him; he had, at any rate, the comfort of believing that she did.

However that may have been, it did not take her very long to repent of her impulsive denunciation of Leonard and to realize that it had been unwise as well as undignified.

"Oh no; I did not really mean that," she said in answer to a preposterous suggestion on Vawdrey's part. "Of course I cannot leave my husband; and even if I could, your mother would be rather astonished, I think, at being asked to provide a refuge for a total stranger. You must not take me so literally."

"I take it that you were speaking the truth when you said that you felt as if you could not live with him any longer," answered Vawdrey sorrowfully. "I don't know what he has done to-day, and I won't go on asking you; but I have seen enough for myself to know what a br— what a wretched life you have with him. It seems very unfair that marriages can't be annulled when they turn out badly."

"I suppose it would lead to all sorts of awkward complications if they could. At any rate, when one has been disappointed, one ought to have self-respect enough to conceal one's disappointment. You are full of kindness and commiseration, I know; but I suspect that at the bottom of your heart you despise me a little for telling you things which I should have done better to keep to myself."

"You have told me nothing!" exclaimed Vawdrey. "My own eyes and ears have told me a great deal more than you have ever confessed. Despise you indeed! Ah, if you only knew——"

He did not finish his sentence, instruction in the art of public speaking having failed to supply him with that gift of eloquence which is the birthright of more fortunate men; but he stretched out his hand to clasp hers, as the habit of the average mute Briton is when strongly moved. And it was in this affectionate posture that Spencer Frere, bustling into the room with his usual equipment of letters and telegrams, surprised the pair.

The private secretary's smile was so undisguised and so significant that even Vawdrey, who liked the man, lost his temper for once.

"Confound it all, Frere!" he was foolish enough to exclaim; "can't you leave a man in peace for an hour? I'm not the Prime Minister, and my correspondents aren't people of such tremendous importance that you might not have ventured to answer them upon your own responsibility."

"Very sorry to be so intrusive," returned Spencer inexorably, "but there are one or two letters here which I shouldn't have known how to answer without being told. I don't know what your engagements are, you see, and if I had committed you for next Wednesday evening, when you may have promised to dine with somebody—with Mrs. Jerome, for instance—you wouldn't have liked it."

"Oh, well, hand them over then," said Vawdrey, snatching the sheaf of papers impatiently out of the

other's hand. "I have got to go back to the House almost immediately, and I can read this stuff on the way."

He was annoyed with Frere for having caught him in a compromising attitude, and still more annoyed with himself for having made matters ten times worse by exhibiting his annoyance. He thought the best thing he could do now was to take himself off; so he beat a somewhat precipitate retreat. Spencer lingered behind him just long enough to say politely to Mrs. Jerome,—

"Please accept my humblest apologies. How you must hate me! But then you were not precisely devoted to me before, were you?"

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

SPENCER INTERVENES.

VAWDREY did not see his too officious secretary again that day. He was detained until a late hour at the House of Commons, where he dined; and when he returned to the spacious dwelling in Dover Street which he had taken for six months, in the hope of inducing his mother and his sisters to join him later in the year, Frere was either out or had gone to bed. But they met at breakfast the next morning, when Spencer at once remarked,—

“You look uncommonly glum, and I fancy I can guess the reason why. If I know anything of women, you have just received a letter from our friend Mrs. Jerome, calling me every sort of bad name for having broken in upon that interesting conversation of yours yesterday, and suggesting that I did it on purpose.”

“Perhaps you don’t know quite as much of women as you imagine,” answered Vawdrey shortly. “Anyhow, I have not heard from Mrs. Jerome, and if I had I don’t suppose that she would have mentioned you or complained of your bouncing into her drawing-room ‘on purpose,’ whatever you may mean by that.”

“Oh, she might have accused me of doing it on purpose and told no lie. I don’t mind owning that I have been keeping my little eye upon you both for some time past. Now, look here, Vawdrey; I’m a good bit older than you are, and I’ve seen a lot more than you have. Be advised by me, and don’t let that woman make a fool of you.”

Vawdrey was one of the most modest, tolerant, and good-tempered of men; but there were limits to his forbearance, and his blue eyes flashed as he said,—

"I can't stand this sort of thing, Frere. You mean well, I have no doubt; but your experience of women, if you'll excuse my saying so, hasn't been exactly an experience of ladies, and you don't seem to understand how a lady feels. In future——"

"I understand what it means when I see a man and a woman holding each other's hands and sitting so close together that their noses almost touch, anyhow," interrupted Spencer with a laugh.

"I was going to say," continued Vawdrey, keeping his temper, "that in future, if you please, we will not mention Mrs. Jerome's name, and that I don't wish you to follow me to Hans Place again."

"Oh, all right; of course you're master and I'm only servant. Don't say I didn't warn you, that's all. You will be the second good fellow of my acquaintance whom she has played the deuce with. Austin isn't so much to be pitied. It was pretty bad form to engage herself to him and then throw him over at the last moment because she had taken a fancy to Jerome; still, he would have been even worse off if she had married him. But when you have figured as co-respondent in the Divorce Court, and have 'made the only reparation in your power,' and so forth and so forth, you won't much relish her taking a fancy to somebody else—which she is certain to do."

"I think you had better stop there," said Vawdrey with ominous calmness, as he rose from the breakfast table. "I can't allow you or anybody to speak of Mrs. Jerome in that way."

"My dear man," returned the other contemptuously, "this is a free country, and if I choose to express my opinions, I don't know who is going to stop me. My opinion of Mrs. Jerome is——"

But Spencer's opinion of Mrs. Jerome was stated in terms too crude to be acceptable to the general reader. They were so far from being acceptable to Mr. Vawdrey that he was in two minds about taking off his coat and requesting his secretary to do the same.

As a preliminary measure, however, he only said quietly,—

“That is a lie, and you know it.”

Spencer got up slowly, and stood looking into the other's eyes. A liar he might be, but he had never been a physical coward; and indeed if he and his late superior officer had set to work with their fists then and there, it is by no means certain that he would have had the worst of the encounter. But, not being particularly angry, he saw the absurdity of resorting to fisticuffs. The teacups would be upset, the servants would rush in, the combatants would be dragged apart, one or other of them with a black eye perhaps; possibly a policeman would be called in. There is no method, in these days, of avenging insults which can only be wiped out with blood.

“I dare say you know that I am not afraid of you,” he said at length; “to tell you the truth, I don't much care whether you know it or not. You have been a good friend to me, Vawdrey, and I'm sorry, both for your sake and my own—especially for my own—that we have got to part now; but of course, after what you have said, I can't stay any longer in this house; so I'll just pack up my things and send for a cab.”

Thus, not without a touch of dignity, Spencer Frere made his exit. He may have expected to be recalled, and he may have been willing to accept an apology; but neither recall nor apology was vouchsafed to him in the course of the next hour and a half. Just before he left the house the butler handed him a sealed envelope, which on being opened was found to contain a cheque for a quarter's salary. This he pocketed, together with his pride (alas! he had learnt long ago how to pocket the latter), and went his way.

He told the cabman to drive to a hotel in Jermyn Street that he knew of, and having secured a bedroom, sat him down to think. It was not upon the uncertainty of his own prospects that he meditated. It had never been his custom to look far ahead; he had money enough

to meet immediate requirements ; he presumed that, if the worst came to the worst, his wife would have to keep him out of the workhouse, and he was rather glad than otherwise to be relieved from the constraint of duties which he had not found congenial. The question which preoccupied him, as he sat in that shabby little room, with his elbows on his knees, was how he might best pay Mrs. Jerome out : assuredly he did not mean to let her march off from the field of battle with bands playing and colours flying. In the composition of Spencer Frere's not very estimable character personal vanity played a leading part, and Lilian from the very first had contrived to wound him in that vulnerable spot. Ridiculous though it may seem, he was wont to regard himself as irresistible, and a woman who treated him with disdain was a woman whom he could not by any possibility pardon. For the rest, it must be said that he honestly believed Lilian to be what he had called her, that he liked and admired Matthew Austin more than any other man in the world, and that he was not altogether ungrateful to Vawdrey, whom he took to be a good-natured sort of fool. He had, therefore, some plausible reasons, as well as some bad ones, for determining as he did to " put a spoke in Mrs. J.'s wheel."

Early in the afternoon Leonard, emerging from the club in Pall Mall where he had been lunching, was accosted by a gentleman whose society he did not especially covet, but who walked along the street with him, talking about the Liverpool Spring Meeting, and whom he had not the incivility to shake off at once.

" It's little enough that I see of racing nowadays," Spencer remarked with a sigh, when his companion paused at the corner by Marlborough House. " You're a lucky man not to be a member of Parliament, and the next worst thing to being a member is to be a member's secretary, I can tell you ! As for my revered chief, most of my time is spent in hunting for him. Though, to be sure," added Spencer, laughing, " I have found out by this time that there is one covert which is pretty safe

not to be drawn blank. The only trouble is that when I do draw Hans Place, as in duty bound, I generally get cursed for my pains. I wish you would represent to Mrs. Jerome that the Government Whips are losing all patience with her."

Leonard might have rejoined that his personal feelings enabled him to associate himself unreservedly with those attributed to the Government Whips; but, being a little irritated by the other's impudent tone, he said stiffly,—

"I am sorry to hear that my wife's name has been made free with in the way that you describe."

"Oh, it's only chaff," Spencer returned with easy good-humour; "everybody—or at least everybody whose opinion is worth a second thought—knows that it's all right and that you don't mind. Why should you? They only call Vawdrey Mrs. Jerome's poodle-dog to get a rise out of him."

"I didn't know that they called him by that name," said Leonard; "thanks for telling me. Good-morning!"

"I think," said Spencer complacently to himself, as he watched Leonard's tall figure striding westwards, "that that will about do. I haven't committed myself to any assertion that can be disproved, but I have made him feel like a fool. He is going straight home to give his wife a bad quarter of an hour, the upshot of which will be that she will have to abandon her friend or arrange clandestine meetings with him. Unless I am very much mistaken in Vawdrey, that last suggestion will open his eyes; and unless I am very much mistaken in Mrs. Jerome, she will make it. You didn't know your man when you mounted the high horse with me, my dear madam."

Leonard, it is scarcely necessary to say, proceeded forthwith to play the part assigned to him in this farsighted plot. He found Lilian in the drawing-room when he reached home. She was sitting, as usual, with a novel upon her knees, which she was not reading; and although this was the first time that they had met that day, he vouchsafed her no sort of greeting.

"I am sorry to be obliged to say," he began without

preface, "that I must ask you to cease receiving Mr. Vawdrey when I am out. I believe we agreed yesterday to interfere with one another as little as possible for the future; but I dare say you will admit that, so long as we continue to live together, it will be necessary for me to impose certain restrictions upon you. Perhaps you will also admit that I have been tolerably forbearing so far."

"Do you mean that you have become jealous of Mr. Vawdrey all of a sudden?" asked Lilian, gazing at him with cold indifference.

"Oh dear, no; jealousy implies love, I suppose, and there isn't much love lost between you and me, is there? No, if I had been inclined to be jealous, I should have indulged in that luxury some months ago, when my sister was kind enough to caution me against inviting such a gay Lothario to the house. I am not in the least jealous; my private opinion is that you haven't it in you to care a brass farthing for Vawdrey or for anybody else except yourself. At the same time, since you bear my name and are nominally my wife, I feel bound to take some care of your reputation."

It would have been difficult to condense a greater number of cruel words into one short sentence: no man, probably, would have spoken with equal cruelty to a woman whom he had altogether ceased to love. But Lilian, naturally, was not cool enough to make that philosophic reflection.

"My reputation!" she exclaimed, starting to her feet, while her lips quivered with anger. "Do you—you of all people—dare to accuse me of——"

"I accuse you of nothing," interrupted Leonard calmly, "except imprudence. Please let us avoid melodrama if we can. I have told you already that I haven't the vanity or the humility—I really don't know which it ought to be called—to be jealous of Vawdrey; only, since it has come to my knowledge that his friends laugh at him for being tied to your apron-strings, I think the moment has arrived for me to say that they must find some new joke."

"His friends?—what friends?" asked Lilian, thinking at once of Spencer Frere.

Leonard shrugged his shoulders.

"All of them, I dare say," he answered. "You know—or possibly you don't know—that when one man says a thing of that sort in a club a whole flock of geese follow suit; and the House of Commons, so far as he and the members whom he mixes with are concerned, is to all intents and purposes a club."

"It seems to me," observed Lilian, who had calmed down and had resumed her seat, "that you might very well have said all this without insulting me."

"And it seems to me," returned Leonard, "that you might have said what you had to say yesterday afternoon without insulting me. However, we won't renew that discussion. May I trust you to convey the necessary hint to Vawdrey without insulting him? It would be better that the hint should come from you than from me; but your methods are so peculiar that I will undertake the task if you don't feel equal to it."

"Clumsy as I am, I don't see how I could manage to insult him in this instance," answered Lilian. "I suppose what you wish me to say is that you have no personal objection to his visits, but that, as his friends have been laughing at him, and perhaps at you into the bargain, you would be obliged if he did not come to the house again without a formal invitation."

"Yes, that is near enough," said Leonard; and, after a momentary hesitation, he withdrew, leaving his wife with a strong impression upon her mind that his previous assertions had been made merely with the object of depriving her of her one friend.

Rather to her surprise, and perhaps also a little to her disappointment, Vawdrey did not call on that or on either of the two succeeding days, the fact being that his conscience compelled him to fulfil those duties which he had been so wantonly and unfairly accused of neglecting. If the Junior Lords of the Treasury had had no member more recalcitrant than Mr. Vawdrey to deal with, their

task would indeed have been a sinecure. But on Sunday the whips cease from troubling, and on Sunday the jaded representative of the mid-division of his native county betook himself joyfully to Hans Place.

"Well, I've got rid of Frere," was almost the first thing that he said; "I'm sure you'll be glad to hear that. In a way I'm rather sorry to have had to abandon him to his fate; still I must confess that I have rather come round to your opinion about him."

Lilian displayed less interest in this piece of news than she had been expected to do. What, after all, did it matter to her whether Mr. Vawdrey retained or dismissed his private secretary, since Mr. Vawdrey's own dismissal must presently be pronounced?

"Have you and he quarrelled?" she asked languidly.

"I don't know whether you could call it exactly a quarrel. We should speak if we met, I suppose, and if I could be of use to him I would; but the truth is that he cheeked me in a way that I couldn't stand, and as he resigned his berth without apologizing, there was nothing for it but to let him go. For all that, I shouldn't wonder if he meant well."

"I shouldn't wonder if he meant well to you, but it is not very likely that he meant well to me. I suppose, when you say that he cheeked you, you mean that he said something about your coming here so often."

"It doesn't signify what he said."

"Not very much—especially as other people seem to have been saying the same thing. I don't know why it should be thought impossible for a young married woman to have male as well as female friends, but evidently it is, and my husband wants me to tell you that your visits here have been noticed."

"*Honi soit qui mal y pense!*" cried the young man eagerly. "Who cares for the lies of a lot of backbiting old cats? Do you?"

"I don't think I care particularly what cats or dogs or any other variety of living creatures may say about me; I don't think I care particularly about anything in the

world. But my husband says he does, and he may be right. Anyhow, I must obey his orders."

"His orders!" echoed Vawdrey ruefully. "Has he ordered you to cut me then?"

"Oh no; he would not ask me to do anything so embarrassing for us all as that would be. Only he wishes me to explain to you, as politely as I can, that I shall not be at home henceforth when you call. Don't put on that face of consternation; you won't suffer from the interdict half as much as I shall. Though I can lay my hand upon my heart and swear that, so far as I am concerned, there was no necessity for it."

Vawdrey could hardly lay his hand upon his heart and make a similar declaration. What he could say with truth, and did say—knowing all the time that he ought not to use such words—was that his sentence of banishment had fallen upon him like a sentence of death.

"Of course I am nothing to you," he added, with a touch of bitterness; "but you are everything to me—everything! What harm was there in my being allowed to see you and talk to you sometimes? If that man cared for you, if he even treated you with common humanity, I shouldn't mind so much—at least, I don't think I should. But when he makes your life miserable, when he goes out of his way to slight you publicly, when he——"

"Don't go on," interrupted Lilian; "if you say much more, you will make it impossible for us to meet again even as acquaintances. What you have said, and what I shall forget as soon as I can, only justifies him. I am very unlucky; the people whom I like best in the world always seem either to hate me or——"

"Or to love you!"

"Oh, their love doesn't last long. I was going to say that they either hated or misunderstood me."

"Which did that man Austin do?" asked Vawdrey, with a sudden pang of unreasoning jealousy.

"I don't know; at present I believe that he does both. But that is just as well. You, at any rate," added

Lilian with an unmirthful laugh, "cannot possibly have misunderstood me. I have spoken plainly to you, if I never spoke plainly before in my life. Now go away, and don't bother yourself about me any more."

So presently Vawdrey left the house, reflecting sadly as he went that Mrs. Jerome's parting advice had been sound, although it could not be followed. She did not love her husband; she might or might not love the unknown Austin; but it was as clear as daylight that she had never loved, and never would love, the forlorn legislator whom she had just sent about his business.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

MATTHEW AND HIS FRIENDS.

HABIT, at once the blessing and the curse of the human race, reconciles us all to many things which we start by hating—to loss, to penury, to sin, in some measure even, it may be hoped, to physical pain—and Matthew, who had at first felt very miserable and forlorn in his cramped lodgings, became quite attached to them before the winter was over. It is true that he still had to turn his head the other way when he drove past his own gates; it is true that the sight of black-browed Mrs. Cohen, issuing forth from them in her showy barouche, still caused him a pang, and that the constant requests of Bush for orders as to this and that connected with the garden depressed him a little. Not for him would those packets of seed break into many-coloured parterres; not for him would the roses bloom or the creeping-plants spread themselves over bank and rock. But upon the whole he was not discontented. Very few people who are busy all day long have leisure to be discontented, and although the small amenities and luxuries of life are pleasant, it is wonderful how little they have to do with happiness. Matthew was so fond of pretty things and comfortable surroundings that the fact of his being able to dispense with them was in itself a pleasure to him.

In these days he frequented the Wilverton Club more than of yore, sometimes obtaining there the ridiculously early or preposterously late substitute for dinner with which he could not ask his landlady to provide him, and there he often encountered Mr. Frere, whose custom it was to drop in for a rubber of whist or an hour's conversation towards evening. One afternoon in spring the old gentleman met him as he was entering, and said,—

"You're the very man I was looking for. I can't get any sleep at night, and I believe I've got a touch of lumbago, and my liver's all wrong, and in short I want overhauling generally. Couldn't you come back and dine with us for once? You must eat your dinner somewhere, you know, and I'll give you a lift out. Mrs. Frere would like to see you too. Not that she's exactly ill; but she wants cheering up, and so do I, goodness knows."

Indeed, it soon appeared that cheering up, rather than medicine, was what the family chiefly stood in need of. Mr. Frere explained on the way to Hayes Park what it was that had put his liver out of order and had ruffled the serenity of his wife's usually equable temper.

"I'm sure I'm no advocate for forcing girls to marry against their will," he grumbled, "and when Anne was fool enough to reject Baxendale, not a word did I say, except to tell her that she didn't seem to know on which side her bread was buttered. But I did think he would have given her a second chance. So did her mother. She kept on saying, 'Don't worry her, George'—as if I ever worried anybody—and she will come round in time.' And now hang me if the fellow isn't going to be married at once to some confounded widow or other who has picked him up in London! Upon my word, it's enough to make a bishop blaspheme! And on top of it all I get about a dozen bills from Harry's tradesmen for the deuce knows what rubbish that he ordered before he went to India. I do assure you, Austin, there are moments when I wish I had never had any children at all. Don't tell Mrs. Frere that I said so though; she thinks me unfeeling enough as it is."

Mrs. Frere did not think that, nor in truth was it her wont to ascribe any blame to the peppery little husband who remained her lover after so many years of married life; but Matthew found her more dejected than he had ever seen her before, and it was evident that she did not acquit Anne of unfeeling conduct.

"I can't deny that it is a dreadful disappointment,"

she sighed, after Matthew had joined her in the drawing-room, of which she was the sole occupant. "From what Emma Baxendale said—and Sir William himself—I did quite hope that he would have been more constant. And the provoking part of it is that Anne is as pleased as possible. She does try to look contrite and submissive; but you know what an unmanageable face she has. From her childhood up she has never been able to deceive an infant. I still believe that if that tiresome man had only had the patience to wait until next summer she would have yielded. She must have been thinking of yielding, or she wouldn't be so obviously rejoiced now."

When Anne came in to dinner, her aspect coincided so amusingly with the description given of it by Mrs. Frere that Matthew could not help being tickled, although his sympathies were entirely with the disobedient daughter. The expression of her countenance was akin to that which all butlers must have noticed scores of times upon the features of those to whom they have addressed the welcome formula "Not at home." The expectant visitor has done his duty; it is no fault of his that he is turned away from the door; he departs rejoicing, but, for the sake of decency, disguises his glee beneath a thin veil of regret. Anne, to be sure, had not quite done her duty, but possibly she had contemplated doing it under certain contingencies; and now, behold! the shadow of those impending contingencies had been removed from her path. No wonder she breathed more freely, and no wonder she was anxious to make such amends as she could by dutiful conduct towards the parents whose hopes had been frustrated.

The old people were comically displeased with her, and showed their displeasure by resolutely ignoring the small attentions with which she plied them during dinner. Too kind-hearted to bully or reproach their daughter, they nevertheless felt that such perversity as hers ought not to be allowed to pass wholly unpunished; so they pretended not to hear when she spoke to them, omitted

to thank her for the eagerness with which she anticipated their wants, and kept her out of the conversation in a pointed manner.

So little mystery had been made about the whole business that when Matthew approached her at the end of the long drawing-room after dinner, Mr. and Mrs. Frere having settled down to a game of *bésique* by the fire-side, she said without any embarrassment,—

“ I am in disgrace, you see ; but this time the blame does not lie entirely with me, so that I can’t feel as I did some months ago. Do you think I am a monster of selfishness ? ”

“ Frightful ! ” answered Matthew ; “ I never heard of a more flagrant case of egoism. How you could hesitate for a moment to provide your parents with a wealthy son-in-law and your brothers with excellent covert-shooting, when all you were asked to do was to put your personal inclinations out of the question, is more than I can understand.”

“ It is all very well to laugh, but you know that if you had been in my place you would have put your personal inclinations out of the question at once. Well, I can’t help it ; I am not constituted as you are, and I shall never be able to do the heroic things that you do. Is it true that old Mr. Litton is dying ? ”

“ I don’t think so,” answered Matthew. “ He seems to me to be growing more feeble and apathetic ; but as far as I know, he may live for some years yet. Why do you ask ? ”

“ Because I suppose that when he does die Mr. Jerome’s debts will be paid and you will be allowed to go home again.”

“ You choose to assume that Jerome has debts, and that the payment of them is some concern of mine,” remarked Matthew. “ I never told you that that was the case.”

“ And you never denied it, because you couldn’t tell an untruth. I am not hoping for Mr. Litton’s death ; if he can still enjoy life, let him enjoy it as long as pos-

sible, poor-old man! But I do hope that he won't dis-appoint his nephew by leaving all his property to some charity."

"It is not usual to dispose of a large country house and a considerable landed estate in that way," answered Matthew, laughing. "I wish I were as sure of your being a rich woman some day as I am that Leonard Jerome will be a rich man."

"Why should you wish me to be a rich woman? Am I so much greedier of riches than you are? If I had been—but I am sick of talking about myself and my perverted ideas," concluded Anne impatiently, as she rose and moved to a seat nearer the bésique-players, by way of putting an end to the conversation.

Now, whether it was desirable or undesirable that Mr. Litton's spirit should be released from the prison-house of an ailing body, certain it was that the inhabitants of Wilverton Grange did not expect to keep their master with them much longer. Dr. Jennings had told them plainly that the end was in sight; and Matthew himself, who called at the Grange a few days after this, was struck by the old man's pallor and air of exhaustion.

"I am very tired to-day, Austin," Mr. Litton said. "I have been making a fresh will, and making wills is tiring work—especially when one has no means of knowing whether one has done the right thing or not."

"Oh, I have no doubt that you have done the right thing," Matthew declared.

"I don't see how you can be free from doubt about a matter of which you know nothing. I am not free from doubt, and yet I know as much as I am ever likely to know on this side of the grave. Do you ever hear from Leonard?"

"Well, no; it is rather a long time since he last wrote to me."

"He never writes to me, but I hear things through the servants. He and his wife are living a cat-and-dog life, I understand. It serves them right; they are only

reaping what they have sown, like the rest of us. They wouldn't get on any better together if they had plenty of money, I suppose."

"I don't know that: most of the quarrels that one hears about are connected more or less directly with money. At all events, the want of it is apt to turn people's temper sour."

"Ah, it cuts both ways: the possession of it doesn't tend to make a man amiable or to increase his affection for his fellow-men, I assure you. A curious thing is that, little as I care for money and little as it has ever done for me, I don't half like the thought of handing it over to somebody else. My own wish, I believe, would be to leave this place and a corresponding income to you. Oh, don't look alarmed; I haven't done that, and I am not going to do it: eccentricity must have limits. But I would rather think of you as living here than of—than of those who will come after me. What does it matter, when all's said and done? I shall know nothing about it."

"Your best plan," returned Matthew cheerfully, "is to go on living here yourself. And there is no reason that I know of why you shouldn't."

"My dear Austin," said the old man, straightening himself a little in his chair and gazing with keen, sunken eyes into the other's face, "do you suppose that I should have acquiesced as I have done in certain transactions which I have not invited you to explain unless I had been perfectly well aware that I was near the finish? I looked on and said nothing, because I knew that my death would set things straight, and because I wanted to see whether there was any gratitude in that fellow or not. I can't say that I am surprised at finding that there is none."

"Why have you always repelled him?" asked Matthew sorrowfully. "You yourself say that we must reap as we sow."

Mr. Litton made no reply for some time.

"I was very fond of him when he was a boy," he said

musingly at length. "He was a nice boy—active and manly, and clever too. But he has chosen to throw away all his gifts. I dare say I have been harsh with him; I didn't think it wise to spoil him. But it is not to me alone that he has shown himself selfish and ungrateful. Of course it is possible—just possible—that he may turn over a new leaf. Anyhow, he had better be sent for, I suppose."

Matthew placed the interpretation which he had been meant to place upon this remark, and wrote to Leonard the same evening.

"I do not myself believe that your uncle's life is in any immediate danger," was the form in which he worded his summons, "but he is in low spirits about himself and he wants you, though he is too proud to tell you so. I hope you won't be too proud to offer yourself to him."

Three days later Leonard appeared in person to assure Matthew laughingly that pride of that description was far too expensive a luxury for him to indulge in.

"I've seen Jennings," he added, "and I should imagine, from what he says, that the closing scene was imminent. As for Uncle Richard, he received me about as cordially as a badger receives a terrier. He asked whether I had come to make arrangements for the funeral, and hoped I should approve of his last will and testament when I saw it. I said I hoped so too; whereupon he requested me to get out of his sight. Nice, conciliatory sort of old person that uncle of mine. He didn't allow me to leave the room before he had told me some agreeable home truths."

"You must bear with him," said Matthew; "he is old and ill, and you have tried him in more ways than one. Besides, his bark is worse than his bite."

"I sincerely trust so; still, I must confess that I don't enjoy being barked at. I get about as much of that as I can stand on the domestic hearth. Sometimes I wonder whether any man was ever so barked at before upon such slight provocation. Lilian's last grievance is that I

have turned you out of house and home. Now, I ask you, as a truthful man, is that the case? Was there the very smallest necessity for your letting your house and going into these beastly lodgings? Hasn't everything turned out exactly as I told you it would? and isn't it certain that your advance will be repaid before the summer is over?"

The aggrieved tone in which these questions were put was matched by Matthew's reply, which likewise took an interrogative form.

"What made you tell her anything about it?" the latter asked. "I thought the matter was to be one entirely between ourselves."

"I didn't tell her; she found out. Women are as sure to find out everything as they are to be found out themselves in the long run. Moreover, I must say that, if you wanted the secret kept, you set about keeping it in a funny sort of way. Whatever Uncle Richard may be, he is not a simpleton, and it was easy enough for him to guess, by putting two and two together, why a man with an increasing practice was compelled to cut down expenses all of a sudden. Not that you were really compelled to do any such thing; that's the provoking part of it."

Matthew hung his head. He felt that Leonard had some just cause for complaint against him, and he hardly knew how to justify himself.

"Well, he said, after a minute, "I am sorry if I let the cat out of the bag, but I still think that I was right to exercise a little forethought. To speak openly, I had to consider what my position would be in the event of my having to do without the interest of £10,000 for three or four years."

"As if I had ever dreamt of inflicting such a penance upon you!"

"I know you never dreamt of it, my dear fellow; still I had to take possibilities into account. I thought at the time—and I haven't changed my opinion yet—that your uncle was and is free from any organic disease. If

there is any absolute reason why he should not live for another ten years I do not know of it."

"You don't mean that!" exclaimed Leonard in consternation; "you are not speaking seriously."

"I am speaking quite seriously; but of course, as I am not Mr. Litton's doctor, I have nothing to form an opinion upon except the evidence of my eyes."

"Ah, well, that's true," observed Leonard, drawing a breath of relief. "And Jennings says he may drop off his perch at any moment."

"Exactly so; and that is why I wanted you to come down," answered Matthew, whose nerves were set on edge by such speeches; "but I suppose it isn't necessary to keep on reminding him that his health is in a precarious state."

"Not in the least; and I haven't reminded him of it. It was he who first introduced the subject. All the same, I hope he won't keep me here long. As you may imagine, I am eager to return to my happy home and my devoted wife."

He continued for some little time to make his hearer wince by discoursing about Lilian in this sarcastic strain. Sarcasm was not his strong point, and he overdid the thing painfully; but it was at least abundantly clear that he was both angry and unhappy. Matthew said very little, finding it impossible to judge from a one-sided report whether Leonard or Lilian was responsible for the deplorable condition of affairs hinted at; only he noticed, with sorrow, that his friend had deteriorated mentally and physically. The healthy, careless young fellow had become an anxious, irritable, and somewhat sallow-faced man; he had put on flesh, and his eyes were no longer clear.

"Worry, late hours, and too much eating and drinking, I suppose," was the physician's unspoken verdict. "What helpless machines we all are, and what small cause any one of us has to crow over another! Well, I dare say he will get rid of his worries soon, for the old man doesn't seem to cling to life."

Aloud he said,—

“ I must be off on my rounds now. I will look you and your uncle up in a day or two. Meanwhile, try to be kind and pleasant with him—if for no other reason, because it is quite upon the cards that he may execute a fresh will yet.”

CHAPTER XL.

PROVIDENCE OR NEMESIS.

MATTHEW'S landlady gave it as her opinion that if Mr. Austin was curing other people, he was assuredly killing himself. "Up till all hours, eatin' of his dinner *where* he can and *when* he can, tearin' about in that dog-cart of his, whether 'tis rain or shine—flesh and blood can't 'old out against such ways," she told one of her cronies. "I can't complain of his givin' trouble; but as for makin' of him comfortable, I put it to you whether I can undertake it, with on'y myself and the girl to look after him and the ground-floor fam'ly. Glad shall I be when he gets back into his own 'ouse! Whatever he wanted to let it to them Jews for—coinin' money as he must be—is more than I can account for; and a nice job 'twould be if I was to 'ave him fall ill on my 'ands!"

Matthew, though a little fagged at times, was in no danger of falling ill; but he certainly had a very long list of patients, and so some days elapsed before he found time to inquire after his old friend at Wilverton Grange. When he did so, he was able to obtain information from the best authority; for, as chance would have it, he encountered Dr. Jennings at the foot of the staircase. Amicable relations had always subsisted between the two rival practitioners, although the elder did not quite approve, and perhaps could hardly be expected to approve, of his colleague's friendly visits to Mr. Litton. In his heart of hearts he suspected Matthew of sometimes giving advice gratis; but not even to his wife had he confessed that he entertained such unworthy suspicions. Upon the present occasion he was very polite, suave, and oracular, giving it to be understood that his

patient was, if anything, a shade better, but abstaining from the mention of details.

"I have told Mr. Jerome that, while this cold wind lasts, his uncle should not leave his bedroom," he said. "Great care and complete rest: if these instructions are adhered to, we may—er—hope for the best, I believe. I do not think that Mr. Litton ought to see many people just now."

"Oh, then I won't go upstairs," answered Matthew.

Dr. Jennings spread out his plump hands, closed his eyes, and smiled deprecatingly.

"My dear sir, pray do not take me as laying any prohibition upon you. I do not know what subjects you are in the habit of discussing with our friend. Sometimes I have noticed that he was a little agitated after his interviews with you, but that may have been pure coincidence. I feel convinced that I may rely upon your discretion as I would upon my own. *Good-morning.*"

Many and many a time afterwards did Matthew regret that he had not taken the hint thus delicately conveyed and left the house with his bland fellow-physician; but he knew perfectly well that a visit from him could not do Mr. Litton any harm, and he was anxious to hear how the uncle and nephew were getting on together. Presently, therefore, he was ushered into the long and lofty bedroom, where Leonard was sitting with the old gentleman, and a hasty glance from one to the other convinced him that they were not getting on together at all.

"Don't let me detain you," Mr. Litton said, holding out a welcoming hand to Matthew, while with the other he waved his nephew impatiently away. "There is nothing for you to do either indoors or out of doors, I am afraid; but I presume that you would rather be anywhere about the premises than here."

Leonard looked at the newcomer with a slight elevation of his eyebrows and shoulders, as who should say, "You see what I have to put up with;" but he answered good-humouredly enough,—

"I'll leave Austin to entertain you, then. If you want me later on, I shall not be far away."

"You are very kind," returned the old man, speaking in dry, harsh accents, "but I do not know why you should think that I am likely to want you. Haven't you just heard from Jennings that the alarming symptoms have disappeared?" When the door had closed behind Leonard, he asked, "Ought I to beg pardon all round, do you think? Jennings has been comforting me with sanguine assurances, and my disconsolate nephew has been laughing on the wrong side of his mouth. Perhaps the least I can do is to offer to pay his railway fare from London and back."

"Well, I am very glad to hear that you are better and that Dr. Jennings thinks so," said Matthew, judging it best to ignore observations to which he could not reply at once honestly and agreeably.

"What! Although you know that there will be a legacy for you when my will is read? My dear Austin, you surprise me!"

"Come, Mr. Litton; I haven't done anything to deserve that sneer."

"Well, well! I beg your pardon, then. If I am not to apologize to you for my indecent tenacity of life, let me apologize for my bad manners. Perhaps you will admit that, under all the circumstances, a little irritation is pardonable. I don't complain of that fellow for wishing to enter upon his inheritance, but he might have the good grace to look rather less woe-begone when he is told that I may survive a few weeks longer."

"You see what you are determined to see in his face. If he looked delighted, you would say that he was trying to humbug you."

"H'm!—should I? It is certain that he wouldn't look delighted unless he was trying to humbug me. Possibly he is not so very much more contemptible than the average human being, and possibly I may give him rather greater cause to bless my memory than he would have if I were to die to-night. There will be time yet

to send for the lawyer once more, it seems. You have no idea, Austin, what a strange sensation it is to be so near death and yet to feel as well as I do at the present moment. I have no pain; there is nothing the matter with me that I am conscious of, except a certain languor. And, quite between ourselves, I don't want to die; though there is no reason that I can think of why I should want to live."

"A man must be very unhappy or in very great pain before he wishes to die," said Matthew.

"I suppose so. How can people sing the hymns that they do in church about longing for the New Jerusalem and so forth without laughing? Imagine some breathless messenger darting in among the devout congregation with the news that an earthquake was imminent. What a stampede there would be, headed by the parson! For my own part, I have never had any curiosity to behold the City of the Blest, or any expectation of taking up my residence there. Looking back upon the past, I consider that I have done my duty fairly well. I have committed no great sins, having had no great temptations. My sins of omission have been more numerous, no doubt; still it would be absurd to say that I have earned an eternity of suffering. Dives, you know, was sent to hell upon the express ground that he had had his share of good things on earth and that it was somebody else's turn now. At any rate, threescore years and ten would square matters between him and Lazarus—supposing, of course, that Lazarus found it enjoyable to repose in Abraham's bosom and do nothing for so long a period. I am shocking you, I see."

"You do shock me a little," confessed Matthew frankly; "it is so easy to turn matters of faith into ridicule by pretending to interpret imagery literally. I don't think you really mean what you imply, either."

"What do I imply? That I can't accept the doctrine of Communism, and that I can't for the life of me see what other doctrine is involved in that parable? You, I suspect, are a bit of a Communist at heart; but I am

quite sure that His Holiness the Pope, with his Peter's pence, and the Archbishop of Canterbury, with his £15,000 a year, are nothing of the sort. Priests and sceptics, theologians and philosophers, we none of us have the most distant idea of what our future state will be, and I presume that is why we are so desperately unwilling to enter upon it."

Matthew stated his own simple creed, to which it may be hoped that neither the Pope nor the Archbishop of Canterbury would have taken much exception. If he did not convince his hearer, whose long life had been spent chiefly in reading, and who had the origin and development of most dogmas at his fingers' ends, he at least increased the esteem and affection with which the latter already regarded him.

"You are a good man, my dear Austin," Mr. Litton wound up the dialogue by saying. "I wish with all my heart you were related to me, so that I might have some plausible excuse for leaving the Grange to you."

"I assure you I shouldn't like it," answered Matthew; "I have neither the training nor the tastes of a country gentleman. Leonard, you may depend upon it, will make a far better master here than I ever should."

"Who told you that he was going to be master here? He may or he may not succeed me; I have not made up my mind yet. In any case, he will inherit quite as much as he deserves. You may console him by telling him that from me, if you like."

Matthew did not repeat these exact words; but when, after taking his leave, he came upon Leonard sauntering listlessly about the garden, with his hands in his pockets, he felt entitled to state that Mr. Litton had no intention of disinheriting his nephew.

"Oh, I never supposed that he would cut me off with a shilling," Leonard answered, somewhat ungraciously; "the question is whether he means to leave me money enough to keep up a place like this. If he doesn't, I shall sell the place, that's all."

"You had better not say so to him."

"It doesn't seem to matter much what I say to him; he would pick a quarrel with an angel from heaven! Shall I go back to him now, or do you think he might be left to vent his nasty temper upon his valet for the next few hours?"

"A dying man must be allowed some privileges," Matthew began.

"But, confound it all, he isn't dying—at least, he declares he isn't."

"Let him have his privileges, all the same. If I were you I should go and sit with him. Whatever he may pretend, he does really like having somebody to talk to, and I think he will be pleased if you go to him of your own accord."

"I don't believe he wants me," said Leonard rather sullenly; "you heard the amiable speech with which he turned me out of the room just now. He takes it for granted that I am only here for the purpose of dutifully closing his eyes, and the worst of it is that he is not in the least mistaken. Anyhow, I think I'll go for a stroll before I face him again."

As matters turned out, it was very unfortunate for Leonard that he did not adhere to that resolution. He was cross and dispirited; he knew he was not in the frame of mind to listen patiently to his uncle's caustic remarks, and a little fresh air and exercise would doubtless have done him good. But in the history of individuals, as in the history of the world, trifles play an important part; and it was a trifle that made him decide, after Matthew had left him, to return to the house, instead of stretching his legs with a long walk. He was nearing the stable-yard when a groom rode out, and stopping for a moment to look at the horse, he asked carelessly,—

"Where are you off to, John?"

"Telegram for London, sir," answered the man, exhibiting the slip of paper upon which Leonard's eye caught the name of his uncle's lawyer.

He walked on, while the groom trotted down the

drive ; but at the end of a hundred yards or so he paused and turned on his heel.

"What fresh atrocity is that old brute meditating now ?" he wondered. "I expect he has told Austin something, and if it's anything unpleasant, he won't be able to deny himself the pleasure of telling me. Perhaps, after all, I had better go in and find out what this means."

What it meant was that Mr. Litton had almost made up his mind to execute a will considerably more favourable to Leonard's interests than that which already existed ; but nobody would have guessed as much from the reception that he accorded to his nephew.

"This is an unexpected honour," he sneered. "Have you anything particular to say, or to ask for ?"

"I thought you might be rather dull all by yourself," answered Leonard shortly.

"What kindly solicitude ! No, I don't feel much duller than I have felt for the last twenty or thirty years, thank you, and I don't feel much worse in health. I am sure you will be glad to hear that."

"Good heavens ! hasn't this sort of thing been said often enough ?" exclaimed Leonard, at the end of his patience. "Let it be agreed and acknowledged that I am waiting anxiously for you to draw your last breath, and let us try and talk about something else !"

"By all means," replied the old man, smiling grimly. "What would you like to talk about ? I am no authority upon sport ; I haven't kept myself informed as to matters of social gossip ; and politics, I am afraid, don't interest you. Perhaps it would interest you to hear that I have just telegraphed for my lawyer, and that, when he comes, I shall instruct him to draw up a new will for me."

"Of course it would interest me to hear what the provisions of your new will are to be ; but I don't suppose you mean to tell me."

"Oh, I might, if I were pressed. Half the pleasure of cutting out a thoroughly undeserving expectant is

lost when one reflects that one will not be present to see his long face at the reading of the will."

"I don't know what you call undeserving," said Leonard, turning rather white.

"You don't, eh? Well, I call a man who deliberately wastes his whole life undeserving; I call a man who steals his best friend's sweetheart undeserving; I call a man who, not content with that achievement, proceeds to sponge upon his best friend for money, undeserving. I may be wrong; but that would, to my mind, be a tolerably final definition of an undeserving person."

"It would be a mere waste of time to protest against your flattering estimate of me," said Leonard. "May I venture to inquire what form of punishment you propose to inflict upon the monster that you describe?"

"Oh, I don't pretend to have the power of inflicting adequate punishments: Nemesis or Providence usually undertakes jobs of that kind. But I should say that such a man as I have spoken of might think himself lucky if, on the death of an uncle whose wishes he had never troubled himself to consult, he came into a legacy of £1,000. Or shall we put it at £2,000, to clear ourselves from all suspicion of rancour?"

This was worse than the worst that Leonard had ever contemplated. He did not perceive that the old man was simply amusing himself with a somewhat grisly jest; he really believed that he was being threatened with the loss of what he had counted upon as a certainty, and the blood rose to his head.

"By God!" he exclaimed, "you shall never make such a will as that!"

"How are you going to prevent me from doing what I please with my own?" asked Mr. Litton, bending forward and rubbing his hands together. "Thank you for displaying yourself to me in your true colours, though. I feel amply compensated now for my inability to return here with the mourners after my funeral."

It may have been the old fellow's chuckling, malicious laugh that maddened Leonard; it must, in any case,

have been some sudden access of madness that prompted him to grip his tormentor by both elbows and shake him violently. The moment that he had committed this unmanly assault a reaction set in, and he fell back, trembling and overwhelmed with shame.

Mr. Litton was trembling too. His face became of a ghastly, grey hue, his lips turned blue; twice he struggled to speak, and then sank in a heap upon his chair, his jaw dropping and a glassy film overspreading his eyes.

Leonard Jerome was neither a coward nor a fool. More than once in the course of his life he had found himself in situations sufficiently trying to the nerves, and his presence of mind had never failed him. But now he stood for several minutes as if paralyzed, staring stupidly at the huddled-up figure in the arm-chair, while a cold sweat broke out upon his forehead. He knew quite well what had happened; he knew that his uncle was dead; he knew—or at any rate he believed—that his own position was a perilous one, and that it behoved him to take some measures in order to secure his personal safety. Yet he remained motionless and helpless. He kept on repeating to himself, "He is dead, and I have killed him. He is dead, and I have killed him." But beyond that point his brain refused to work. He had just sense enough left to abstain from ringing the bell—just sense enough to be aware that, if one of the servants was to enter the room at that moment, his guilt would be legible upon his scared countenance.

Then on a sudden it flashed across him that nobody knew of his having returned to his uncle's bedroom. Why should anybody ever know? The question had hardly formed itself in his mind before he turned and fled. Presently he was in the great dim empty library; he had dropped into one of the leather-covered arm-chairs and was trying to think. Surely he was not the murderer! Of course he was not; it would be preposterous to accuse himself, or allow himself to be accused, of that. But he certainly would not be accused, since there was no

evidence of any sort or kind. And beyond all doubt the poor old man was dead, so that raising a disturbance and sending for the doctor would do no good in the world. He had died, too, without altering his will. Readers will be glad to hear that Leonard experienced a shock of self-reproach when this aspect of the case presented itself to him, although they will easily understand that self-reproach is not always incompatible with self-congratulation. By degrees his pulse resumed its normal regularity and his head grew clear. There was really no need for agitation or forethought ; all he had to do was to slip quietly out of the house, return from his walk in half an hour or so, and display some natural consternation on being informed of the calamity which had occurred during his absence.

“ What a mercy it is,” said he to himself, as he stepped out through one of the dining-room windows and made for the shelter of the adjacent shrubbery, “ that I told Austin I was going for a stroll ! All the same, I wish to Heaven I had kept my word ! ”

He was likely to wish that to the end of his days. That he would ever be charged with having brought about his uncle's death was in the last degree improbable ; but that he would escape all punishment for what he had done was, it may safely be asserted, impossible. As Mr. Litton had remarked, “ Nemesis or Providence usually undertakes jobs of that kind,” and jobs undertaken by “ Nemesis or Providence ” are pretty sure to be successfully carried out.

CHAPTER XLI.

LEONARD GETS HIS DESERTS.

WHILE Leonard wandered through the woods, which (as he reflected) were now his own, and in close proximity to which the greater part of his future life would probably be spent, he assured himself that his feeling of guilt and remorse was overstrained. He was very much ashamed of having laid violent hands upon a helpless old man, and very sorry that in a moment of passion he had so far forgotten himself as to act in that way; but as he had assuredly been innocent of any intention to kill his uncle, he was no more guilty of murder, or even manslaughter, than he would have been if their altercation had been confined to words. Every day somebody is driven over in the street, and the driver who has been so unfortunate as to knock the life out of him is as often as not exonerated from all blame. Still, the driver, no doubt, feels uncomfortable for some little time after such a mishap, and Leonard would fain have believed that the extreme discomfort of which he himself was conscious was of a kindred nature. He wandered about in the woods for more than an hour, expecting every moment that some agitated messenger would come out in search of him; but his solitude was not disturbed, nor did he see or hear a living creature, except the birds and a bright-eyed squirrel, who stared questioningly at him until he impatiently picked up a fir-cone and drove the inquisitive little beast away. What could it possibly matter to a squirrel whether Richard Litton or Leonard Jerome ruled over that small portion of the world in which its lot had been cast?

The human dependants of the late Richard Litton proved less suspicious and less impertinent. Every-

thing fell out exactly in accordance with Leonard's anticipations. On his return to the house he was met by his uncle's valet, who seemed to be genuinely distressed (is not the loss of an easy and well-paid berth enough to cause genuine distress to anybody?), and who told him just what he had expected to hear.

"Understanding that you were out, sir, I sent at once for Dr. Jennings," the man said; "but there wasn't no sign of life when I found the master in his chair. He must have been took very sudden with one of those attacks he has had lately, and I suppose Mr. Austin was the last person to see him alive. I hope you don't think I was to blame, sir. The master never liked me to go up to his room without I was rung for; nor yet I shouldn't have gone up when I did, only I began to feel uneasy about him."

No blame was imputed to any one either by Leonard or by Dr. Jennings, who arrived later in the day, and unhesitatingly pronounced death to have been due to failure of the heart's action.

"The very thing, Mr. Jerome, which, as you may remember, I warned you that we must be prepared for. Did I not mention that to you? Well, perhaps it was to Mr. Austin, whom I met on his way to see your poor uncle. I had hoped that, with care and precaution, his life might have been prolonged for months, or even years; but I cannot say that I am at all taken by surprise. The truth is that my poor old friend—if I may be permitted to call him so—has been upon the brink of eternity all the winter through. It is some comfort to me, personally, to know that I was successful in bringing him through his late illness, and that he has succumbed to organic disease, against which medical skill is powerless."

To hear that Dr. Jennings had not been taken by surprise was, at any rate, some comfort to the bereaved nephew, and it was a greater comfort still that he was not even asked whether he had seen his uncle after Matthew Austin had left the house. Lies, no doubt,

would have to be told subsequently ; but Leonard was not a practised liar, and he wished to be spared the ordeal of telling them as far as might be. During the remainder of the day and until late at night he had so many indispensable duties to attend to that the voice of conscience could not get a hearing from him. Relatives, near and distant, had to be communicated with ; orders had to be given ; the date of the funeral, and the necessary preparations for it, had to be considered. To his wife Leonard dispatched a brief and cold announcement of the fact that Mr. Litton was dead, adding that if she wished to come down to the Grange she could, of course, do so, but that he did not himself see any need for her leaving London at present. In reality he dreaded Lilian's questions and the searching gaze of her disdainful eyes. Of late she had always conveyed to him the disagreeable impression that she had found him out, although there had been nothing so very heinous to discover. There was something now, and he did not care about being confronted with her.

Much more eager was he to be confronted with Mr. Mildmay, his uncle's lawyer, whose advent on the following morning threw him into a flutter of more or less pleasurable excitement. But the tall, grave, bald-headed man was as reticent as he was impassive, and never a hint could be obtained from him as to the purport of the last will and testament which he had prepared, under his late client's instructions, some ten days previously. He had no reason to suppose, he said, that that document had been revoked or destroyed ; he believed he knew where it was to be found, and he would, with Mr. Jerome's permission, take charge of it until the proper time should come for it to be read. He was quite unable to say whether Mr. Litton had telegraphed for him with a view to making other testamentary dispositions or not ; it might be so, but he really had no means of knowing. Somehow or other, Mr. Mildmay's manner was not altogether reassuring. The lawyer was polite and deferential ; but surely he would have been a little more congratu-

latory if he had been in the presence of a wealthy man, whose patronage was worth securing.

"Well," thought Leonard to himself, "if the worst comes to the worst, I can but sell the place, and it is pretty certain that I have said good-bye to poverty."

Then he thought of his uncle's ironical suggestion that he might consider himself lucky if he came into a legacy of a couple of thousand pounds, and he remembered with compunction the paroxysm of anger into which he had been thrown by that absurd menace. Yet he could not banish the idea from his mind that, if he had exercised a little more self-control than he had done, he might have, and probably would have, fared a good deal worse than he was now likely to do. "Good Lord!" he muttered, "if I don't look out, I shall be rejoicing at having killed the poor old fellow presently. How desperately near we all are to being downright scoundrels!"

Most of us, it is to be feared, are not quite as exempt from risk of coming under that category as we should like to be; still, a fair proportion of us (knowing that we have as yet done nothing absolutely scoundrelly) are able to take a complacently detached view of human depravity. As for Leonard, his self-esteem, which had fallen to a somewhat low ebb, was encouraged towards recovery by the visit from Matthew Austin for which he had been prepared, and to which he had looked forward with certain misgivings.

"Oh, you needn't tell me that," Matthew interrupted his first halting expressions of regret by saying; "as soon as I saw your face I guessed how you felt about it. But, of course, you could have had no idea that the end was so near; and now that my poor old friend is gone, I may confess to you that in my opinion he provoked you unnecessarily."

"I really think he did," said Leonard eagerly. "I always tried my best to keep upon good terms with him, but he was simply irreconcilable. After all, they say that no man likes his heir."

"He has made you his heir, then?"

"I suppose so; but I don't know anything about it yet. That fellow Mildmay has collared the will, which is to be read after the funeral, I believe. That is the usual course, isn't it?"

"I can't tell you," answered Matthew. "I should have thought that the nearest relative of the deceased would have a right to examine all documents; but I have no experience in such matters." He added meditatively, after a pause, "I wish you had seen him once more before he died, though."

"Would it have made any difference if I had?"

"In a pecuniary sense? Well, it might; he spoke to me as if he contemplated making some further alteration in his will. But, my dear fellow, I know you too well to believe that you are as heartless as you choose to make yourself out. You would like to have shaken hands and made friends with the old man before he died; and it is because you didn't that you have been lying awake half the night and have given yourself those dark circles under the eyes. Don't worry yourself any more; depend upon it, your uncle has forgiven you; and I think we may also depend upon it that if he is in a state of consciousness now, he is conscious of having sometimes been a little unjust to you."

This unexpected tribute to his personal character put Leonard in considerably better conceit with himself, while it relieved him from the necessity of uttering those false statements which had seemed to be inevitable. Dead men tell no tales, and the only living man who might have interrogated him as to what he had been about on the afternoon of his uncle's death took it for granted that he had nothing to reveal.

Lord and Lady Bannock, together with a number of more or less interested, but not very sanguine, connections of the late Mr. Litton, arrived in time to attend the funeral obsequies, which were performed with much gloomy splendour. A long string of carriages followed the *cortège*, and most of the county notabilities attended

in person ; for although Mr. Litton had never been intimate with his neighbours, and although, among the many mourners who stood around his grave, Matthew Austin was probably the only one who regretted him in the least, he had been very rich, and he had led an irreproachable life. To have been the one and done the other is assuredly to have established a claim upon the customary forms of public recognition.

“ Well, well,” Mr. Frere remarked to Matthew, after the conclusion of the ceremony, “ I dare say poor Litton would have been alive now if he had had the sense to send Jennings about his business and call you in ; but it’s an ill wind that blows nobody any good. There will be gayer times at the Grange now that young Jerome has come into the property, eh ? Can I give you a lift home ? ”

Matthew declined this offer, having received an intimation from the solemn Mr. Mildmay that his presence at the reading of the will would be desirable ; so he returned to the house with those members of the family who had come from a distance, some of whom, he fancied, looked slightly askance at him. He felt a little apologetic towards these sullen-looking collaterals, knowing that he was to receive a legacy, and doubting very much whether they would get anything at all amongst them ; but he was a good deal less anxious to hear what his own share of the spoil was to be than to ascertain what provision had been made for Leonard. Disappointment, he was afraid, awaited his friend, and he felt pretty sure that Leonard had reached one of those critical stages in life at which disappointments are apt to have serious consequences. The young man’s marriage had turned out badly ; the chances were that he was deeply in debt ; he had no profession or occupation ; if he should now succeed to a property which he was without the means of keeping up, he might very likely turn sour or go to the dogs altogether. On the other hand, prosperity might be the salvation of him—might even bring about a return of that conjugal felicity which, after all,

is more frequently insured by good spirits and good temper than by anything else. Which of us knows the real truth about his neighbour? Matthew's nature was so sympathetic that he understood his own sex better than the generality of men can pretend to do; but it cannot be said that he was a very excellent judge of the other. The fact is that he had no high opinion of the woman whom he had once loved, and that he held Lilian chiefly answerable for the moral decay of which he could not help detecting symptoms in Leonard.

It was from cogitations of a somewhat melancholy kind that Matthew was aroused by the sound of his own name, pronounced loudly and emphatically. He was sitting in the great library where he had so often spent a pleasant hour with the crippled old man who would never open a book again, and he had been listening inattentively to a long list of small bequests, read out in a dry, monotonous voice. That he himself would be mentioned presently he was aware; but it startled him not a little to hear that the amount bequeathed to him was no less a sum than £20,000. Matthew stared in amazement at his fellow-listeners, whose amazement appeared to be fully equal to his own. Twenty thousand pounds to a mere acquaintance! But this was not all. To the said Matthew Austin the testator likewise bequeathed the whole of his valuable library, "knowing that by him my books will be appreciated and cared for, while a trifling expenditure will enable my residuary legatee to fill up the vacant shelves with a sufficiency of handsomely-bound volumes."

Matthew hung his head, feeling very like a robber, wishing with all his heart that he had been less munificently treated, and unable as yet to realize what a difference the acquisition of this small fortune would make in his future life. The lawyer went on reading. Leonard Jerome was to have £30,000 down, together with a certain portion of the family plate; to Lady Bannock were left the pictures, household furniture, carriages, the rest of the plate, and so forth. Finally,

after a scarcely perceptible pause, came the unexpected announcement that to Lady Bannock also went the residue of her uncle's estate, real and personal, for life, with remainder to her eldest son, or, in default, to Leonard Jerome's eldest son, or, in default, to any such person (with the exception of Leonard Jerome) as Lady Bannock might by her last will and testament nominate.

The awestruck silence with which this statement was received was broken at length by the voice of Mr. Litton's heiress, who exclaimed,—

“I never heard of anything so monstrous! Of course I shall not think of cutting my brother out. I don't mind accepting something reasonable, but I shall at once take steps to have this property and a fair share of income handed over to him.”

Mr. Mildmay rose, crossed the room, and began to explain to the indignant lady in a low voice how impossible it would be for her to act in the manner indicated. Then there was a general breaking up of groups and unloosening of tongues. The sable-clad relatives (not one of whom had, after all, been forgotten, and who were consequently in a mood to view with leniency the eccentricities of their departed kinsman) made for the door, and presently Matthew was able to approach Leonard, who, with his hands in his pockets, was standing beside one of the windows, whistling softly.

“Well,” remarked the latter, “this is what you might call a pretty good sell; isn't it?”

“I am very sorry,” said Matthew.

“You oughtn't to be; you haven't done so badly. Not that I grudge you your luck, old man; I only wish he had left you double the money—which indeed he might have done without impoverishing the residuary legatee. As for me, I must try to look pleasant. After all, when I have paid you what I owe you and settled a few other claims, I shall still have some extra hundreds a year, I suppose. One can be quite happy upon a small income when one is as fortunate in other respects as I am, you know.”

"There is just this to be said," observed Matthew, thinking it best to disregard the allusion—"that your sister has no children and is not likely to have any now ; whereas you——"

"Oh, I'm not likely to have any ; and if a son were born to me to-morrow, the chances are that I shouldn't be alive to borrow a five-pound note of him when he came into his inheritance. No ; I'm effectually bowled out—and, upon my word and honour, I can't quite understand why ! Perhaps I ought to be congratulating myself upon having got as much as I have."

"I am convinced," said Matthew sadly, "that he did not mean that will to stand. It is a thousand pities that his life was not prolonged for another twenty-four hours."

Leonard made no rejoinder ; he was thinking to himself that Providence or Nemesis had indeed undertaken his case to some purpose.

Matthew, for his part, soon saw that the best thing he could do was to leave the brother and sister to discuss the new state of affairs together. He took his departure somewhat shamefacedly, and went back to his lodgings with a confused sense of having profited more largely by the liberality of his deceased friend than he ought to have done. Yet, as a matter of fact, Lady Bannock was far too rich to miss £20,000 and too little of a literary connoisseur to regret her uncle's library, while a country doctor who loved his house and his garden might well permit himself to rejoice a little at the thought that he would ere long be again in possession of both.

CHAPTER XLII.

“ARBITRIUM POPULARIS AURAE.”

“To my mind,” said Mrs. Jennings, shaking her head solemnly, “it is a very strange affair—very strange indeed. And I suppose we shall never get at the rights of it now. What we do know is that that man was the last person who saw Mr. Litton alive, and that he has profited enormously by poor Mr. Litton’s death. It is difficult to believe that such a will can have been made without instigation, and altogether—— However, it is best to say as little as possible, and I should not have said as much as this to any one but you.”

“What does Dr. Jennings think about it?” eagerly inquired the old lady who was drinking Mrs. Jennings’s tea, and who, it is needless to add, was only one of many who had been honoured with an equal share of that amiable woman’s confidence.

“Oh, you know what Dr. Jennings is! He is too cautious, besides being far too kind-hearted and considerate, to commit himself. But I am sure that even he feels now that there ought to have been an inquest.”

“Well,” said the other, “I must confess that there was always something I didn’t quite like about Mr. Austin—a sort of absent manner, which gave one the impression of an uneasy conscience. Still I never thought of his being a murderer.”

“Oh, my dear, what a word to use! Do you suppose I meant to imply that he had poisoned the old man or throttled him?”

“But if he didn’t, what would have been the good of an inquest?” asked Mrs. Jennings’s friend pertinently.

“I did not say,” replied Mrs. Jennings, with some displeasure, “that a coroner’s jury would have returned

a verdict of murder against Mr. Austin. But it is perfectly possible to cause death without resorting to violence; and I happen to know for a fact—that much my husband has admitted—that Dr. Jennings, who met him as he was entering the house, particularly cautioned him against agitating the patient. Of course he may be quite innocent; only I cannot truthfully say that his conduct strikes me as that of an innocent man. To accept a legacy of £20,000 under the circumstances, and never even attempt to explain how such a sum came to be left to him!—well, I really don't think he can be surprised if the general feeling is that he owes some explanation to honest folks."

The general feeling, unfortunately, was very much what Mrs. Jennings asserted it to be. She herself, no doubt, had done what in her lay to create and foster that feeling; but perhaps it would have arisen without her aid, for very few people are sincerely rejoiced to hear that their next-door neighbour has come into a fortune. The circumstances, too, were a little suspicious. Was it not a matter of notoriety that Mr. Austin had had pecuniary losses early in the winter? Was it not well known that he had been a constant visitor at the Grange, although he had never visited Mr. Litton in his medical capacity? Had not everybody noticed that for some time after the funeral he had gone about with a hang-dog look, and had replied brusquely and awkwardly to the congratulations of his acquaintances? And that simulated friendship of his for Leonard Jerome, against whom he might naturally be supposed to cherish a grudge? Oh, there was more in it than met the eye; and although there may not have been many persons in Wilverton who suspected Matthew Austin of murder, not a few were surprised and disappointed to learn that there was no prospect of the will being contested on the ground of undue influence.

The chief beneficiary under the will would have been only too glad to see its validity contested; but she was advised that such a course (even if it could be adopted

with any chance of success) would prove in no way advantageous to her brother ; so she had to content herself with devising other means for improving her brother's pecuniary position—which, as she was now sole mistress of considerable wealth, was no such difficult matter after all. Lady Bannock remained at the Grange, where there were a good many things to be attended to ; while Leonard returned to London, and, consequently, did not hear the unpleasant rumours which were being circulated about his friend.

Some weeks passed before these rumours came to Matthew's ears, and it was in a somewhat modified form that they reached him at length. He did not understand, that is to say, that he was accused of having killed his benefactor, but only that he was supposed to have utilized his unquestionable influence over Mr. Litton for his own ends. That, he could not help acknowledging, was a very natural comment to make upon the case. He had half expected it and did not greatly resent it, being, as usual, a good deal more disquieted about other people's affairs than about his own. Leonard had gone off to London without wishing him good-bye, and had not written since ; Lady Bannock, whom he had seen once or twice, had spoken with much bitterness of Lilian, who, she declared, was doing far more towards disgusting her brother with life and driving him to despair than could ever have been accomplished by the gross injustice of Uncle Richard—"though that has been enough to sicken anybody." Upon the whole, it seemed but too probable that a promising career was in danger of ending badly.

Lady Bannock was not unaware that disagreeable things were being whispered about her friend the doctor ; but she had not introduced the topic in talking to him, partly because it was an awkward sort of topic to introduce, and partly because she herself was inclined to think that, since Matthew had possessed such power with the old recluse, he might have employed it more unselfishly. However, she mentioned current reports

to Leonard, when he ran down to make arrangements for the removal of the plate which he had inherited, and the outburst of wrath with which her information was received imbued her more than ever with the admiring conviction that she had been blessed by Heaven with the noblest and most chivalrous of brothers.

Leonard^s was for starting off there and then, and "forcing that woman Jennings's lies down her throat;" but, as Lady Bannock pointed out to him, it is not possible to deal with a liar of the female sex in that way; and after a good deal of vapouring, he was fain to rest satisfied with the adoption of methods slightly less heroic. What he finally decided upon doing was to betake himself to the club, wait until the smoking-room was tolerably well filled with members, and then state, in a loud and defiant voice, how sorry he had been to hear that his friend Austin had been subjected to calumnies in certain quarters. There was not, he said, the shadow of an excuse for such calumnies, and he only wished he could trace them to their source.

Nobody responding to this indirect challenge, he went on to declare that what had struck him as being especially infamous was the insinuation that Austin's last interview with his uncle had had the effect of hastening the latter's death; whereupon an old gentleman observed mildly,—

"But surely, Mr. Jerome, one may assume that to have been so without making any infamous insinuations. I understand that Mr. Litton suffered from heart disease, and that Dr. Jennings had warned him of the risk of agitation. How can we tell that no agitating discussion took place in the course of that interview? It seems reasonable enough to conclude that something of the sort did take place."

"There was no agitating discussion at all," answered Leonard shortly.

"Oh, if you tell us so, we are bound to accept your word; but, so far as I am aware, Mr. Austin has not deigned to give the slightest information upon the subject to anybody."

"Why the deuce should he? Who has the pretension to put him upon his trial, I should like to know?"

"My dear Mr. Jerome," said the old gentleman, "you are quite right to stand up for your friend, and every one will honour you for doing so; but I'm afraid people will not be deterred from forming and expressing their own opinions by being simply told that you exonerate him. For my own part, I must confess that, if I were in his rather equivocal position, I should have taken some measures to clear my character before now."

Leonard blustered a little; but as he had not the courage to avow that he himself had seen and spoken with his uncle after the interview alluded to, his bluster produced no great effect upon his audience, and he went away feeling that he had done more harm than good.

Not without shame and contrition did he proceed to look up Matthew Austin, who was now once more installed in his own abode, and who smiled at the vehemence with which his visitor denounced the busybodies of Wilverton.

"I know that some uncharitable remarks have been made about me," Matthew said; "but so long as they are not made to my face I don't see why I should take any notice of them. Besides, they were really inevitable. One can't inherit a fortune from a comparative stranger without being accused of fortune-hunting."

"Oh, I don't so much mind their calling you a fortune-hunter," answered Leonard.

And then, urged on by an irresistible craving to face the worst and have done with it, he proceeded to mention the specific charge which had so roused his ire.

The worst—in the sense which he mentally applied to that expression—did not come; for his friend never thought of putting the question which he had dreaded.

"It is not pleasant," said Matthew, rather gravely, "to be accused of having, either intentionally or unintentionally, brought about the death of a fellow-creature; but it can't be helped. Moreover, there is just the possibility that what these people say may be true.

Your uncle did not seem to me to be disturbed in mind when I left him; but, as you know, we had been talking of disturbing matters, and he may have been more upset than I thought. Anyhow, I couldn't affirm upon oath that our conversation had nothing to do with the attack which proved fatal to him: such as the imputation is, I must submit to it."

For a moment Leonard was very nearly telling the whole truth. If it is not pleasant to be accused of having brought about the death of a fellow-creature, it is more unpleasant still to be conscious of having actually done so; but it is, or ought to be, most unpleasant of all to stand by and let another bear the blame of one's own misdeeds. He had opened his lips to speak (fearing, perhaps, lest delay should expose him to an overwhelming and ignoble temptation), when Matthew resumed lightly,—

"Anyhow, my shoulders are broad enough to bear the burden. The people whose opinion I value won't think ill of me, and as for the others—well, since I don't value their opinion, why should I care to alter it? I don't suppose they have it in their power to do me the slightest harm, even if they wished to harm me; but most likely they don't. They chatter for the sake of chattering, and because the sterility of their minds leaves them a very limited range of subjects."

It was in this guise that temptation presented itself to a harassed man and got the better of him. After all, was it in the least probable that Matthew would be injured by gossip which was sure to die down and be forgotten in the course of a few weeks? On the other hand, was it not painfully certain that if Leonard now had to confess what he had hitherto deliberately concealed, he must needs brand himself at least as a liar, if not as something worse? So he hesitated and was lost. Matthew began to ask questions about Lilian, to which he returned absent-minded replies; he himself had to explain that it would be difficult for him immediately to repay those £10,000, and to

receive the anticipated assurance that there was no sort of hurry about the matter. He went away at length, having avowed nothing and knowing full well that he must henceforth for ever hold his peace. He had saved his reputation and parted with his self-esteem—a bad bargain, no doubt, but one which has been made thousands of times, and will continue to be made with tolerable frequency until the human race becomes perfect or extinct.

Matthew, unfortunately, had underestimated the mischief-making powers of Mrs. Jennings and her satellites. These were in reality by no means trifling, and he was forced ere long to admit as much. He was likewise compelled to acknowledge that he was less indifferent to the good opinion of his neighbours than he had boasted of being. How essential to his comfort had been the popularity which he had always hitherto enjoyed he only discovered when he lost it; and that he had lost it he was not permitted to doubt. Wilverton did not precisely send him to Coventry, but unambiguous methods were adopted of signifying to him that he was under a cloud and that intimate association with him was no longer desired. At first he did not mind averted looks and cold replies to his greetings; then he began to look out for these tacit slaps in the face; then he grew sensitive and turned out of his way to avoid them; finally, he reached the point of confessing to himself that if such a course of treatment were persevered with, his life would cease to be worth having. What hurt him more than anything else was that even Mrs. Frere, who might have known him better than to condemn him unheard, passed him in the street one day with a bow and without a smile. He had some hope that the morbid acuteness of his perceptions had led him to suspect a slight where none had been intended, until the same thing occurred again, after which doubt was no longer possible.

Yet he was not left without one partisan amongst so many foes; and of this stimulating fact he was made

aware at the very moment when his spirits had fallen to so low an ebb that he had almost decided to leave the place. Pacing slowly to and fro in his garden on a sunny afternoon (for the dull season was again at hand and patients were few) he was not a little taken aback to see Anne Frere's tall figure advancing towards him across the grass. She was quite alone, and the faint flush upon her usually pale cheeks testified to her consciousness that she was doing a somewhat unconventional thing by thus calling upon a bachelor.

"I caught sight of you from the road," she began, speaking quickly and a little breathlessly, as if she had not complete control over her voice; "I thought you would not mind my coming in for a minute. I—I rather wanted to speak to you."

"I am only too delighted," Matthew declared. And then, either because he was affected by the contagion of her embarrassment or because he had lost through disuse the trick of setting other people at their ease, he came to a rather awkward standstill. "It seems a long time since we last met," was the only observation that he could hit upon, by way of breaking the silence that followed.

"Yes, it is some time," agreed Anne, in an absent-minded tone. She added abruptly, after she had stood for a moment, glancing at the flowers and the shrubs, at anything and everything except her companion, "Spencer has left Mr. Vawdrey."

"Indeed! I am sorry to hear that. Has he returned to his wife? Are you anxious about him?"

"Oh, I am always anxious about him, and I always shall be, I suppose, to the end of the chapter. No; he hasn't gone back to his wife; I don't know where he is or what he is doing just now. He wrote several weeks ago to tell me that he and Mr. Vawdrey had had a quarrel, and that—well, he said a good deal that isn't worth repeating. I was wondering whether, by any chance, you had heard from him."

Matthew shook his head.

"But if you would like me to make inquiries—if I can be of any use——"

"No, no, indeed!" interrupted Anne; "I didn't come to ask for more favours. You have done so much already, and we have made such a poor return—all of us!" She paused for a few seconds; then, forcing herself at last to look Matthew full in the face, she said, "It was only an excuse about Spencer; he will let me know if he is really in need of help. What I want to say to you is that it makes me feel sick and ashamed when I think of the way in which you have been treated. You are big enough not to care, and Maggie and I are only two very insignificant members of the community; still, it would make us a little more comfortable if you knew that, whatever other people may say or think, we shall never believe one single word that is spoken against you."

"You are very good!" exclaimed Matthew. "I assure you it is more than a little comfort to me to know that. As for the charges that have been brought against me, I can't very well meet them, because I can't disprove them. I might give up the money; but that would look more like a tardy admission of guilt than anything else."

"You must not think of doing that! Of course you cannot pay these wretches the compliment of letting them think that they have wounded you; and yet—they *must* have wounded you."

"I confess," Matthew could not help replying, "that I did not think my friends would have taken me for a murderer."

"Oh, they don't call you that; they think—but I haven't the patience to ask them what they think. What they say is that it is a mysterious affair and that it ought to be cleared up."

"Well, perhaps that isn't a very unnatural thing to say."

"I call it most unnatural and most ungrateful!" returned Anne hotly. "Even if there were strong evidence—but there is absolutely none—of your having

come into this money by anything but fair means, I should never think of asking what it was worth. I know for certain that you are incapable of a shabby action."

"Then," said Matthew, his mouth and eyes breaking into a sudden smile, "I am content. I won't deny that I am very sorry to have lost your father's and your mother's friendship; but so long as I have not lost yours——"

"You never will," Anne declared firmly. "Please remember that, because I may not have many chances of meeting you now. Come what may, you will never be misjudged by Maggie or by me."

He held out his hand half involuntarily, and she took it; but even as their fingers met, one of her old fits of shyness overcame her. She drew back at once, saying,—

"That is all; I must not keep you any longer now. I am glad I have told you, and so will Maggie be, when she hears. Good-bye."

Her movement of retreat was executed with such rapidity that she was out of sight before he could say another word; but in truth he was not anxious to detain her. He was grateful—happy—a little bewildered. He wanted to be alone and to bring some order into his ideas and sensations, to certain of which he was scarcely able, for the moment, to give a name. Not until late that evening did he realize that he had been calling them by their wrong name for a long time past; but they were not in any other respect unfamiliar to him.

CHAPTER XLIII.

MRS. VAWDREY DOES AN IMPRUDENT THING.

FROM the moment that there has been a recognized split between a husband and wife who continue to dwell under one roof, the position of the husband usually becomes the more tolerable of the two. He is seldom or never debarred from seeking such substitutes for domestic joys as are to be found elsewhere ; the indifference which he may have begun by affecting tends rapidly to develop into a reality, while anything in the shape of an understanding is, to his mind, preferable to daily wrangles. But women, who are by nature both more quarrelsome and more forgiving, scarcely understand what it is to be honestly indifferent, and can endure downright cruelty more easily than neglect. Thus it was that, while London was assuming its annual aspect of smartness, gaiety, and profuse expenditure, while awnings and strips of red carpet were to be seen in every fashionable street and square, and while that fortunate minority of the population which is so very small and looks so very large was entertaining and being entertained from morning to night, Mrs. Leonard Jerome was unhappy to the point of asking herself whether suicide was, after all, such a heinous crime.

Leonard had told her briefly what the effect of his late uncle's will would be upon their future fortunes. They were not going to be rich—far from it—but with care they would be able to keep a house in London and make both ends meet, he supposed. He had no wish to return to Stanwick, and presumed that she had none. They would, of course, stay where they were until the lease of the house in Hans Place had expired ; later on he would probably join some other fellows in a yachting

and fishing expedition to Norway ; perhaps she would think things over and make her own plans for the summer. He added that she would, no doubt, be glad to hear what a handsome legacy had fallen to Matthew Austin's share.

Well, she was sincerely glad to hear of that ; as for the remainder of the information vouchsafed to her, it caused her, as has been said, to wish that she was fairly out of a world in which it seemed as if she had no longer any place. Whether she loved Leonard or whether she hated him, he was at all events her husband, and she was keenly alive to the humiliation that he proposed to inflict upon her. Many married men go off yachting or fishing for a few months at a time ; but then they do not, as a rule, leave their wives to crave hospitality of possibly reluctant relations, and Lilian did not see what other course would be open to her after London should have ceased to be inhabitable. She had nobody to take counsel with, although she went out a good deal, nor in any case would she have cared to reveal griefs and perplexities for which there could be no practical remedy. Vawdrey, obeying her commands, had ceased to visit her, and it so chanced that she did not come across him at any of the festivities to which she was bidden, although, to tell the truth, she looked out for him anxiously everywhere. The sight of his kindly, honest face would refresh her, she thought ; she wanted to be friends with him again, and she thought very lightly of the passion with which she had been unfortunate enough to inspire him. Judging by previous experience—and by what else do any of us judge ?—she was persuaded that a man's love for a woman is at best but a fugitive emotion.

Fate, however, decreed that if she was to meet her former friend no more, she was at least to be gratified by the privilege of an introduction to his mother. This somewhat stern and severe-looking lady, with the white hair, the steel-grey eyes, and the tall, spare figure, could smile pleasantly enough when she pleased, and it pleased her to smile very pleasantly upon Mrs. Jerome when they encountered one another at a dinner-party.

"I have heard a great deal about you from my son," she said. "He tells me that he has not had the pleasure of seeing you lately; but I am sure you will understand that he is obliged to neglect social obligations. He gives up nearly the whole of his time to his public duties—as, indeed, it is quite right that he should."

Lilian had reason to be aware that the rank and file of the British legislature are not subjected to quite so merciless a system of slavery as that; but she did not dispute the proud mother's assertion, nor was she sorry to find, as she presently did, that Mrs. Vawdrey was strongly predisposed in her favour. It was evident that the old lady had heard nothing but good of her, and from certain remarks which followed, it likewise became evident that sympathy with her and compassion for her lot were the outcome of such reports as Mr. Vawdrey had made to his family.

The results of this meeting were an exchange of cards and a subsequent invitation to tea in Dover Street, where Mrs. Vawdrey was keeping house for her son. Lilian's acceptance was quite independent of any desire that she may have felt to renew friendly relations with her dismissed admirer. She liked the formidable-looking old woman and her two fresh-coloured daughters, who had the fine muscular development and the *beauté du diable* which specially characterize the rising generation; besides which, she was at this time willing to go anywhere rather than sit at home. Nevertheless, it was not without satisfaction that she saw Vawdrey stroll into the room after she had finished her tea and had heard his praises sung in various keys for about half an hour.

"My dear Neville," exclaimed Mrs. Vawdrey, "this is a most unusual compliment! Are we to thank Mrs. Jerome for it? I thought the Agricultural Holdings Bill was to come on to-day."

"I wasn't wanted; they will go on talking for ever so long before we get to a division," the young man answered. He looked decidedly sheepish and self-conscious as he shook hands with Lilian, assuring her that

he had had no idea of the pleasure which was in store for him. "My mother told me she had made acquaintance with you; I was very glad," he stammered. "But she never said that you were coming here to-day; I didn't understand that at all."

He seemed rather unflatteringly eager to convince her that her presence had had nothing to do with his early return. She told him so with a laugh, in which his sisters joined; and then, after one or two apprehensive side-glances at her, he became more comfortable. Lilian, on her side, was not in the least ill at ease: the meaning of his embarrassment was obvious enough to her quick feminine perceptions. The harmless, necessary bride had, of course, been discovered; the young man had yielded to the wishes of his family, had not found them altogether incompatible with his own, and was now a little ashamed of certain bygone declarations which ought never to have been made. Well, it only remained for her to persuade him, if possible, that those foolish declarations had not been taken seriously, and that no woman could rejoice more sincerely than herself at having been superseded. Whether she was successful or not in her benevolent aim, she contrived, at all events, to make him cheerful and talkative, and it was certain that neither his mother nor his sisters supposed themselves to be assisting at the interment of a dead past.

"I was thinking, Neville," said Mrs. Vawdrey, after a time, "that, if Mrs. Jerome has no other engagement, she might like to take my place and chaperon the girls to-morrow evening. Debates in the House of Commons are not such a novelty to me as I dare say they are to her, and I should be only too glad to escape the fatigue."

"Would you?" asked the young man eagerly, bending forward towards Lilian. "You won't hear any of the great guns speak until quite late, I'm afraid; but we are going to dine at the House, and it's rather jolly sitting out on the terrace afterwards, if the weather is fine."

Lilian assented willingly.

"I should like it of all things," she answered. "I have no dinner engagement, fortunately, and if there is anything for the evening it can do without me. But are you quite sure that you don't want to go, Mrs. Vawdrey?"

"Quite sure, my dear," replied the old lady, smiling; "nowadays I much prefer reading the reports of the debates in the newspapers to hearing them with my own ears. I don't know," she added, in a slightly altered and more formal voice, "whether Mr. Jerome would care to join the party."

"Oh, thank you—no, I don't think he would," answered Lilian hurriedly. "I believe he is dining out somewhere, and—and he is not very much interested in politics."

Leonard certainly was not one of those strange persons who peruse the reports of the debates, nor, so far as Lilian knew, had he ever expressed the slightest wish to be present at one; but it seemed possible that he might raise some objection to his wife's improving her mind in the manner proposed, and remembering this on her way home, she resolved to request his permission.

"I thought I had better tell you," she said, when she saw him that evening, "that I have been asked to dine at the House of Commons to-morrow with Mr. Vawdrey and his sisters. I don't know whether you mind my going."

Leonard looked at her in a way which was perhaps not meant to be insulting, but which she, nevertheless, felt to be so.

"Is there any reason why I should mind?" he asked.

"Really, I don't know," she answered impatiently. "You gave reasons for telling me to shut the door in Mr. Vawdrey's face; such as they were, I suppose they still exist."

"Oh, I didn't wish to look like a fool, that was all; but I don't know that it so very much matters. Having acted like a fool, I may as well accept the consequences. By all means dine with Vawdrey and his sisters if you want to dine with them."

In the interests of peace Lilian would have done well to rest satisfied with that disdainful concession, whether she intended to take advantage of it or not ; but it was hardly to be expected of her that she should submit quietly to treatment which she had every right to inflict, and had in no way deserved.

"What do you mean when you say that you have acted like a fool ? " she inquired.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"I am afraid I can't give you a very polite reply ; but if you choose to say the same thing about yourself, I won't contradict you. We both know by this time that we did an uncommonly foolish thing when we married ; now that we have come to our senses, the only wise thing we can do is to live apart as much as possible without scandalizing our neighbours. By the way, I find I can get afloat next week, so that you won't have to put up with me much longer for the present."

"And what am I to do ? " asked Lilian, turning rather pale.

"Just exactly what you please. I suppose you would like to finish the season, and after that you can pay visits or travel about until the autumn, according to your inclinations. I will leave you as much money as you will require."

There was a pause, and then Lilian said, in a voice which she could not keep from trembling slightly,—

"Perhaps you will tell me what I have done to deserve such an ostentatious slight. I don't wish to keep you with me ; you cannot be more anxious than I am that we should see very little of one another. But you yourself seem to think that we had better not scandalize our neighbours."

"What you have done ! Well, if you really want to know—but what is the use of snapping and snarling ? As for your neighbours, they won't be scandalized unless you see fit to give them cause. You don't like the sea, and you don't care about roughing it ; that is a sufficient explanation of your remaining behind. Anyhow, I have

made all my arrangements to go to Norway, and it is too late to alter them now."

If Lilian was wrong in suspecting her husband of a base intention, it must be acknowledged that her suspicion was not wholly unjustifiable. He had said in so many words that he wished to be rid of her; he was about to abandon her for an indefinite length of time, without even the shelter of a roof of her own to cover her; he had already told her that she had been more or less compromised by Vawdrey's admiration, and he knew that during his absence she would in all probability meet her admirer frequently. Was it not natural to conclude that he was looking forward, not without confidence, to being set free by a decree of the divorce court? Many a woman has been goaded into ruining herself by less provocation, and when Lilian drove to Westminster on the following evening she was far too miserable and too reckless to be influenced by her mother's dying injunction, although she did not forget it.

To be sure, Vawdrey was not likely now to tempt her with a proposition to which he might possibly have committed himself earlier in the year. She made that reflection with an inward laugh in which there was a good deal more of bitterness and self-contempt than merriment, while she sat beside him at dinner and listened to his entirely respectful conversational efforts. She had no doubt at all that he was upon the verge of fulfilling his commonplace, enviable destiny; she could see in her mind's eye the blonde, placid, well-born maiden upon whom his mother's affections and his own had been fixed; she felt sure that she would be told all about it before the evening was over; and when, soon after dinner, he led her away from the others to the far end of the terrace above the dark river, she said to herself that the moment for confidential communications had arrived.

But although, when he had begun speaking, the young man's tone and manner were confidential enough, it was not about himself that he desired to talk.

"What is the matter?" he asked anxiously. "You

are looking wretchedly ill, and I saw that you could neither eat nor drink. Are you really ill, or—or has something happened ? ”

The terrace was thronged with members and their guests ; the two girls had contentedly paired off with a couple of elderly gallants, and were paying no attention to their brother's proceedings ; the continuous roar of the traffic prevented the human voice from being audible at a distance of anything over three yards. The chances are that, if left upon a desert island with a single companion, we should all become perfectly frank and simple in our utterances, and the centre of civilization where Lilian had taken up her stand was to all intents and purposes a desert island so far as she was concerned.

“ My husband is going off to Norway for several months, and I don't know what is to become of me while he is away,” she answered.

Vawdrey did not seem to be quite as much impressed by the cruelty of Leonard's conduct as she had expected him to be.

“ Will you—I suppose I have no business to ask such a question—but will you miss him so very much ? ” he ventured to inquire.

“ I shall miss my husband no more than he will miss me. Why should I ? Only I have never been accustomed to taking care of myself, and—and I think I am a little frightened. Of course you wouldn't understand that sort of feeling. A boy is sent away from home as soon as he is out of the nursery, and long before he is a man he has learnt to stand alone ; you don't know how helpless a woman feels when she is suddenly cut adrift and told to go where she likes.”

But as soon as Vawdrey realized that the house in Hans Place must shortly be given up, that Stanwick Hall was once more in the occupation of tenants, and that no arrangements whatsoever had been made for providing Mrs. Jerome with a place of retreat during her period of enforced solitude, his indignation grew voluble enough to satisfy anybody.

"It is simply monstrous!" he ended by exclaiming. "You are not bound to submit to it. Why do you submit to it?"

"What else can I do? Would you have me implore him to give up his expedition and stay with me?"

"I think, if I were in your place, I should tell him he might either do that or agree to a permanent separation."

Vawdrey dropped his elbows upon the parapet and stared silently for a few moments at the swiftly-flowing water and the wavering reflections of gas-lamps beneath him.

"Hang him!" he muttered at length, between his teeth. "I wish to God he would bolt with some other woman—with that Papillon woman or somebody."

"It would suit his purpose a great deal better," said Lilian, replying to an ejaculation which may or may not have been intended to reach her ear, "if I were to bolt with some other man. Perhaps that is what he hopes for."

Vawdrey started into an upright attitude and gazed at her interrogatively for an instant; after which his eyelids dropped.

During that instant Lilian suffered an agony of humiliation which was at least commensurate with the sin against good taste of which she had been guilty. To what lower depth of degradation can a woman fall than to invite a former lover to elope with her—and to be rejected? She felt sure that Vawdrey had construed her words as implying such an invitation; she was almost equally sure that he had made up his mind to bind himself by more legitimate ties; if she had obeyed her impulse and had possessed the requisite pinch of courage, she would have dropped over the low parapet and hidden her shame once for all beneath the rapidly-ebbing current of the dirty Thames. But she entirely mistook her companion, whose opinion of her was far too high, while his opinion of himself was far too modest, to admit of the conclusions ascribed to him.

"I don't know what your husband may not be black-guard enough to hope for," he said, after a pause which

seemed to her interminable, but of which the duration was probably less than a minute; "I know what he deserves! However, it's pretty poor form to talk about thrashing a man when one knows that one isn't going to do it and can't do it. Look here, Mrs. Jerome: it's precious little I can do to help you; but it seems to me that I can do just a little. Why shouldn't you go down and stay at my place when you leave London? My mother would be only too delighted to have you; she likes you for your own sake, and besides, I have taken the liberty of telling her—she understands how things are with you. Stop a bit! I know what you are going to say. Of course, after what has passed, it wouldn't do for me to be there; but I don't mean to be there. I've been intending for a long time to take a run across to the United States, and this will be just my opportunity. I shall sail immediately after Parliament rises, and I'll take good care not to be back before November. Do think of it! It will be dull for you, I know; but at least it will be better than going off to Switzerland or to some beastly watering-place all by yourself; and it's no figure of speech to say that you'll be doing the greatest possible kindness to my mother and the girls if you consent. They will tell you the same thing themselves, only I dare say they will put it in better words than I can."

Lilian was touched by what she took to be his slightly clumsy delicacy. He was behaving very like a gentleman, she thought, and although it was manifestly out of the question to accept his hospitality, she tried to answer him graciously.

"I am afraid I cannot be your mother's guest," she said, smiling, "and I certainly cannot drive you across the Atlantic; but perhaps, after you are married, I will stay with you some day. That is, if your wife will ask me."

"If you wait until I am married, you will never stay with me at all," returned the young man, in a low voice; "I think you know that." Presently he resumed: "What is the use of pretending to ignore a thing that stares us both in the face? I suppose it is wicked to

love another man's wife ; but I don't see how one is to help that kind of wickedness ; and in my case no harm can possibly come of it, because I am perfectly well aware that you don't love me——”

“ I don't—indeed I don't ! ” interjected Lilian eagerly.

“ Of course you don't,” agreed Vawdrey, wincing involuntarily, but raising his eyes to meet hers with courageous cheerfulness ; “ so that the question simply resolves itself into one of expediency. I really do want to go to America, and it stands to reason that I must want to be of any little use to you that I can.”

“ Nobody can be of use to me. For the reasons that you know of, I could not stay in your house ; but thank you a thousand times, all the same. I was afraid,” continued Lilian, rather breathlessly, “ that when I said that just now about running away with some other man, you might think that, to punish my husband, or out of bravado or spite, I really meant—— Oh, here come your sisters ! I suppose it is time for us to go and listen to this dreadful debate. Tell me quickly before they are here—tell me that you did not think that of me ! ”

Vawdrey looked puzzled and astonished ; probably he was quite unable to account for her agitation.

“ Mrs. Jerome,” he answered, “ I give you my word of honour that if an angel from heaven were to tell me you had done anything disgraceful, I—I should hit him in the face ! ”

So perhaps, after all, he was of some little use to her, since it is a well-known fact that the opinion which others hold of us is the standard by which our conduct is, for the most part, apt to be regulated.

CHAPTER XLIV.

MATTHEW UNDERTAKES AN INTERESTING CASE.

WOMEN, it is said, are often unconsciously in love. In the early Victorian days, indeed, when they wore their hair in *bandeaux* or ringlets and had eyes a good deal larger than their mouths, it used to be assumed that this was always the case with them, and that they must of necessity be overwhelmed with surprise and becoming confusion when the young gentleman in the tight trousers dropped lightly on one knee for the purpose of avowing his adoration in well-chosen language. But it may safely be affirmed that such is not, and never has been, the common experience of our own sex. Only a very few of us, like Matthew Austin, are so absent-minded or so altruistic as to mistake the nature of our own sentiments, and even Matthew had the grace to feel rather like a fool when it dawned upon him that he had loved Anne Frere for at least a year without having been aware that he did so.

Was he equally a fool because, after making this tardy discovery, he at once decided that it must be kept to himself? It is not very easy to say how far an innocent man who happens to be under a cloud is bound to accept the disabilities which attach to a guilty one. Most of us, no doubt, would be satisfied with the knowledge of our innocence, and would consider that nothing compelled us to prove a negative; but, rightly or wrongly, that was not Matthew's view. To prove that he had neither unduly influenced Mr. Litton nor expedited his benefactor's death was impossible; to resign the fortune that he had inherited would have been futile. People must, therefore, think what they pleased about him; and apparently it pleased them to think very badly

of him. Under these circumstances, he could not, according to his ideas, ask Mr. Frere's daughter to be his wife ; nor, for the matter of that, had he the slightest ground for believing that she would accept him if he did. He rejoiced to know that her faith in him had not been shaken by calumny, his gratitude to her for the assurance whereby she had comforted him was boundless ; but he had no intention of telling her what he felt or of seeking opportunities for meeting her. It was in some degree his nature to behave like that. When he had been in love with Lilian Murray (for he certainly had been in love with Lilian, and it never occurred to him to turn his back upon himself by asserting that he had not), he had adopted much the same attitude. A mixture of modesty and pride forbade him to take anything for granted ; Anne had shown herself to be a true friend of his, and that—with his present tarnished reputation—was a great deal more than he had had any right to expect of her.

Nevertheless, he saw her every now and again in the course of those long summer days when his loneliness and ostracism weighed so heavily upon him. He saw her father and mother, too, and exchanged a few words with them from time to time, though he was no longer begged to drop in to luncheon or dinner at Hayes Park in the old friendly fashion. Once, indeed, he was invited to a dinner-party, Mr. Frere, as became a magistrate versed in the laws of his country, being of opinion that no man ought to be condemned until his culpability has been established ; but this invitation was politely declined. Matthew, to tell the truth, felt very sore indeed against Mr. and Mrs. Frere, and would make no response whatsoever to the hints with which they favoured him that they desired nothing better than to be persuaded of his integrity. Since they were so ready to set him down as a rascal, it was not by him that any effort should be made to undeceive them, he thought, and the consequence was that after each of those casual encounters they could only sigh and shake their heads.

Now, it came to pass one Sunday afternoon that Matthew went to St. Mark's Church, a place of worship which, as the reader has doubtless forgotten, Anne Frere was in the habit of attending during the summer months; and if Matthew had likewise forgotten that circumstance, he was pleasantly reminded of it when, on the conclusion of the service, she stepped forth from a dark corner where she had been sitting unperceived and joined him in the churchyard.

"Have you time to walk part of the way home with me?" she asked. "I should like to consult you about something."

He had plenty of time. He fancied—though perhaps he may have been mistaken—that people were less anxious to consult him professionally than of yore, and the few patients whom he had upon his books at that time belonged almost exclusively to the poor and non-paying class. In any case, he was quite at the service of Miss Frere, who, as he had anticipated, was once more in trouble about her brother. Spencer, it seemed, had been writing for pecuniary aid, and had obtained it. He was out of employment, had no prospect of earning a livelihood, and had applied to his sister because there was nobody else to apply to.

"That is nothing," Anne said, in answer to the expostulations which Matthew felt bound to make; "I foresaw what must come after he had left Mr. Vawdrey, and I have saved a little out of my allowance. But what makes me really unhappy is the way in which he writes about his health. I am afraid he is more seriously ill than he chooses to confess, and I don't know whether I ought to tell my father or not. You see," she added, "I am not in very high favour at home just at present, and if I could wait a little longer before putting in a word for poor Spencer, I should have a better chance of success, I think. I believe it is almost decided now that Harry is to be made an eldest son of; but until he comes back from India and everything is settled, not much is likely to be done for the real eldest son. Only

I can't let Spencer die, can I? Would you mind reading what he says about himself?"

Matthew perused the letter handed to him, which had evidently been composed in a mood of profound despondency, and in which the writer stated that he was only deterred from hanging himself or blowing his brains out by the conviction that he had but a few months to live anyhow. He did not specify the malady from which he believed himself to be suffering, nor did he complain of anything, save insufficiency of means to keep body and soul together; he merely claimed to know intuitively that he would not trouble the world, nor the world him, much longer. The meaning of these phrases was tolerably clear to the experienced medical man who read them, and who, remembering a certain conversation which he had had with Spencer outside the military hospital at Lowcester, was able to say reassuringly,—

"I don't think there is any need for you to be alarmed. A man doesn't die unless he has something definite the matter with him, and if your brother had anything definite the matter with him, he would quote a doctor's opinion. However, you will have a doctor's opinion upon his case soon; for, of course, I shall go up to London to-morrow and see him."

"Oh, did you think I meant that?" exclaimed Anne, stopping short and looking at her companion in the way which had formerly repelled and provoked him, but which he now no longer resented.

"No," he answered, "I didn't; but I wish you had. Why should you grudge me any trifling occasion of serving you that may come in my way? I wasn't too proud to be thankful when you did me the greatest service that one friend can possibly render to another."

"What service? I only told you—for my own satisfaction and because I couldn't help it—that Maggie and I were not insane enough to believe what ought to have been incredible to everybody."

"Quite so; and for my own satisfaction I am going

to see your brother and report to you upon his condition. It will cost me a little money and take up a little of my time : I have more of both now than I know what to do with ; and if you cannot accept that much from me, I shall know that you do not really regard me as a friend after all."

"I should like you to see him," answered Anne irresolutely ; "but—but I am sure you must think that I was hinting. And indeed I was not. I did honestly want to hear whether you thought I ought to tell them about Spencer or not."

"Well, I couldn't possibly give an opinion without having had a look at him. You shall hear in a day or two what my impression is, and in the meantime I hope you won't worry yourself. His complaint, you may depend upon it, is nothing worse than an attack of low spirits, and those attacks don't kill. If they did I should be in a rather bad way myself."

Thereupon they parted. One of them was too shy to express the sympathy that she felt, while the other was afraid lest a prolongation of the interview should lead him into betraying more than he had any business to betray. The latter, moreover, was not desirous of being catechized respecting Spencer Frere, as to whose condition and its cause he had formed suspicions which were best kept to himself for the time being.

These suspicions of his received ample verification on the ensuing afternoon when he was admitted into the somewhat squalid lodging near Fitzroy Square where Spencer had found a temporary asylum. The languid, pallid, unshaven tenant who rose from his recumbent attitude upon a horsehair sofa to greet the newcomer without apparent surprise or pleasure resembled the ex-Lancer only in so far as a very bad photograph resembles its original ; and after a rapid scrutiny of him, Matthew was not at all astonished to hear him say,—

"It's too late, my dear Austin. Anne has sent you, I suppose ; but you can't do any good now. I'm beat, and there's an end of it."

"Very well ; if you are beat—and I can see for myself that you are—somebody else must take command," observed Matthew quietly. "How long is it since you began drugging yourself again ?"

"Upon my word, I don't remember. About a month or six weeks, I should think—ever since starvation began to stare me in the face. I never really gave it up, you know, except for a short time after I was married. Why I haven't come to a poison dose yet I can't tell you, any more than I can tell you why I haven't dunned my wife for an allowance. Funk in the one case, and a sort of lingering recollection of having once been a gentleman in the other perhaps. You needn't trouble to reason with me or preach at me ; it would be only a waste of breath. I'm quite aware of being a despicable wreck of humanity, and I don't care a straw."

Spencer had always been a little theatrical in his language and ideas. Matthew, not much impressed by a speech which had probably been intended to horrify him, felt the other's pulse, looked into his eyes, asked a few questions, and then remarked meditatively,—

"Well, it won't do for me to lose sight of you yet awhile, and you must be got out of this somehow. The best plan will be for you to come home with me to-morrow. Wilverton is almost empty just now, and, as you will hardly care to stir beyond the garden, the fact of your being in my house can be kept a secret. At the end of a fortnight or so I may be able to see my way more clearly. Of course you will be under supervision ; for I need not tell you that there must be no more morphia."

Spencer laughed drearily.

"You might as well tell me that there must be no more meat or drink," he declared. "Don't you understand that I can't live without it ? My will is gone—absolutely and utterly gone."

"You will have to find it again. I don't say that you have an easy or a pleasant time before you, and I fully agree that reasoning or preaching would be thrown away upon you in your present state ; but, as a matter of

fact, your case is by no means hopeless, and I am going to take charge of it now."

"You are a fool for your pains," returned the other, who had once more stretched himself out upon the sofa and had clasped his hands behind his head; "you know as well as I do that the very best thing you could do for me and everybody else would be to let me die. If you want to be benevolent, why don't you go back to Wilverton, make your report to my affectionate father, and request him to fork out a hundred pounds? That wouldn't be a very long price to pay for the blessing of getting rid of me, and at my present rate of progress a hundred pounds ought to be quite enough to see me out. Besides, I am dead sick of this pig-sty of a world. You and Anne are the only decent inhabitants of it that I have ever met, and you seem to get on pretty badly in it, both of you. I tried to pay that Jerome woman out; but I believe I failed, and I dare say you wouldn't have thanked me if I had succeeded. Give that infernal old landlady of mine a five-pound note to keep her quiet, my dear Austin, and then leave me to wallow in the mire until I choke myself. It's the only thing to be done."

To this garrulity Matthew responded in much the same manner as he would have done to the ravings of a semi-delirious patient. He knew very well that there would be no great trouble at the outset; the question was whether Spencer would prove tractable under the restraint which must necessarily be imposed upon him; after which would arise the further and more difficult question of whether anything resembling a silk purse can ever be constructed out of the proverbial sow's ear. Anyhow, the attempt must be made, and preliminary measures were soon accomplished. On the following afternoon, Matthew, having satisfied the claims of the landlady, took with him on his homeward journey a submissive and sadly-dejected friend, for whose reception he had prepared his servants by telegram, and of whose presence under his roof he did not contemplate apprising Miss Frere immediately. He foresaw that a

more or less arduous struggle would have to be faced, and he did not wish to be interfered with by anybody while it lasted.

For the next ten days he had a somewhat troublesome time of it, although the process of reclamation interested him, and although closer intimacy with his patient brought him a species of compassionate affection for that reprobate. A reprobate the man unquestionably was, and that he could be permanently reclaimed either in a physical or a moral sense seemed, at his age, extremely unlikely; yet there was a chance for him, and it is one of the first axioms of a physician's creed that no chance ought ever to be neglected. Spencer's fractiousness and feeble efforts to defy control yielded by degrees to the good-humoured patience of his gaoler; he tried hard to do as he was told. Beneath the cynicism which he was fond of parading could be discerned clearly enough the unfruitful germs of a certain nobility. He was pathetically grateful and ashamed of himself at times; he had preferred misery and want to accepting assistance from his wife, who, it appeared, had offered to make him a fairly liberal allowance, upon the condition that he should solemnly bind himself to trouble her no more; he did not complain of his father's severity to him, nor had he a word to say against Vawdrey, of whose behaviour to his secretary and its cause Matthew heard a full account. Something was wanting in Spencer Frere—some moral quality, for the lack of which his career had been wrecked; but to define it with precision was a task beyond the reach of Matthew Austin's wit. For the rest, he felt a quasi-paternal liking for this ill-grown specimen of the human race whom he had saved alive, and a quasi-paternal obligation to do what could still be done for him. Moreover, Spencer was Anne Frere's brother.

Anne, who had been informed by letter that her brother's life was not in danger and that he was being looked after, was at length made aware of his whereabouts, and told that she might call and see him any

day. Matthew was out when she arrived, in response to this invitation ; but she awaited his return—as indeed he had expected her to do ; and if on previous occasions she had shown herself a little ungracious towards Spencer's benefactor, no such reproach could be brought against her now.

Matthew interrupted her assurances of eternal gratitude with a laugh.

"If you were a doctor," said he, "you would know that there is nothing we enjoy more than getting hold of a case of this kind. I dare say he has told you what was the matter with him ?"

"Oh yes ; he has told me all about it, and how you have literally snatched him out of the jaws of death."

"Well, I don't know about that ; he might have lived for a long time, though his life would hardly have been worth having, under such conditions. Still, I am not going to deny that I am proud of the case. My treatment has been successful, so far as it has gone ; the only question is whether I shall be allowed to proceed with it."

"You can't keep him here !"

"No, I can't do that, and it wouldn't be to his advantage if I could ; but what I have been thinking of is this. I have a friend out in Western Australia who has been doing fairly well for some years past with breeding horses, and who, I am sure, would be glad to give him employment. Of course the life is a rough and solitary one ; but as he is a good horseman, I believe he would like it, and I am convinced that it would be the best thing in the world for his health. What do you think ?"

"It sounds almost too good to be true !" exclaimed Anne, clasping her hands. "Of course he will go. I don't know whether he would have consented before, but now he will do anything on earth that you tell him to do ; he would start to the North Pole to-morrow if you ordered him. But your friend !" she added, her countenance falling suddenly—"will this be fair upon him ? Ought he not to know what Spencer's history has been ?"

"Oh, that's all right," answered Matthew, laughing.

"I took the precaution of telegraphing to my friend, who says a man with some knowledge of horses and the education of a gentleman will be a perfect godsend to him. They aren't as particular in Western Australia as we are in Wilverton, I assure you. Perhaps those tolerant squatters wouldn't turn their backs even upon me."

Anne winced a little.

"Don't talk like that!" she pleaded. "You make me feel as if we ought not to accept anything from you."

"But it was agreed between us, if you remember, that that was a very unfriendly kind of feeling to entertain."

"I remember your saying so; I don't remember agreeing with you. However, I am ready to be as submissive as Spencer himself now. We are under such a tremendous obligation to you, he and I, already that the least we can do is to obey your commands."

"In that case," answered Matthew, "I will at once command you to say nothing more about obligations."

CHAPTER XLV.

MR. FRERE IS ASHAMED OF HIMSELF.

SPENCER jumped at the Australian scheme. With the self-depreciation which it was his habit to affect, he remarked that, although he was absolutely useless, and although it was rather too late for him to think about making fresh starts, he would hardly be able to cause positive discomfort to anybody at the Antipodes; while, as far as riding and veterinary knowledge went, he supposed he was about equal to the generality of men. "Added to which," he observed, "there won't be any infernal women out in the bush, I presume—and that is a great pull. If there had been no women in England, I should have been a highly-esteemed member of the community to-day, I dare say."

Matthew had his doubts about that, but he did not express them.

"There is one woman," said he, "who ought perhaps to be consulted before you take your passage."

"My wife, do you mean? I'll write and tell her that I'm going, if you like; she will be overjoyed to receive the news. I must say for Arabella that there is an honesty about her, when her back is up, which isn't common with her sex. Before we parted, she told me that nothing except the hope of obtaining a position in the county would have induced her to marry me, and that she wished to goodness I was dead and buried. Arabella, you may be sure, won't sue for a restitution of conjugal rights."

"Still you had better let her know what your plans are. And then about your father: I have been thinking that his consent ought perhaps to be asked, if only as a matter of form."

Spencer shrugged his shoulders. He was of opinion

that, since he was of age, and since he had been turned out of doors to shift for himself, the paternal consent might very well be dispensed with ; but in this, as in everything else, he was ready to take his orders from Matthew, whose mastery over him was as complete as that of a huntsman over a broken hound. By his way of thinking, the man who had cured him (if indeed he was cured) of a vice which he had believed to be utterly incurable could scarcely make a mistake.

The next time, therefore, that Anne came to see her brother, Matthew mentioned to her what he proposed to do.

“ You see,” said he, “ there is no knowing what may or may not happen in the future, and I should feel more comfortable if there had been no concealment about the business. ” Sooner or later, too, your parents are pretty sure to hear who has been staying in my house : one can’t keep a secret which is shared by servants and tradespeople.”

“ Yes,” she agreed hesitatingly, “ I suppose they ought to be told ; but—but I don’t quite know how they will take it, or what they will say about it.”

“ Oh, I am afraid you will have a bad quarter of an hour. Naturally, they will be displeased at your having made plans for your brother behind their backs ; and, under all the circumstances, they won’t like your having come to this house at all. I wish I could spare you this annoyance ; but I don’t quite see how I can.”

“ I wish,” said Anne, a little impatiently, “ that you wouldn’t always talk as if I cared for nothing except my own convenience. I doubt whether it will enter into their heads to scold me, and it would not in the least matter if they did. It was about you that I was thinking. You are doing this great thing for us, and we ought all to be most thankful to you ; but I am afraid you must not expect them to be thankful. I am afraid, after what has happened, and the way in which they have behaved to you——”

“ That they will set me down as an impertinent and

officious meddler? No doubt they will; but what if they do? Frankly speaking, they have hurt my feelings so much already that they have quite taken the edge off my sensitiveness. They are heartily welcome to call me anything they like. I am not asking any favour of them, you see, and certainly I am not doing them one."

"Oh, but you are!"

"Only in an indirect fashion, anyhow. What little I have done has been done for your brother's sake—and for yours."

Matthew paused for a second before uttering the last words, which indeed he felt that he was scarcely justified in adding; but Anne did not seem to take them otherwise than in a friendly sense.

"You have always been very good and kind to us," she said. "Neither Spencer nor I have deserved it, and I am afraid we haven't even acted as if we appreciated it. I am so clumsy, and he is—well, he hasn't been fortunate in his methods of showing how much he likes and admires you. His quarrel with Mr. Vawdrey——"

"Oh yes, I know," interrupted Matthew; "he told me all about that, and I was very sorry that he should have been possessed with a mistaken notion of avenging me. Of course I didn't want to be avenged upon Mrs. Jerome, and of course I should have been very sorry indeed if he had been able to get her into any trouble."

"Yes; but Spencer wouldn't understand that: his friends are his friends and his enemies are his enemies. I suppose he looks upon the enemies of his friends as his enemies too, and his notion of an enemy would be a person who had deliberately done him an injury."

"But Mrs. Jerome has done me no injury."

"So you are generous enough to say."

"There isn't any question of generosity in the matter," Matthew declared, with some earnestness. "She jilted me, of course; but I should be the last person to reproach her for having changed her mind, seeing that I have completely changed mine."

"Have you?"

"I believe I ought to say so. I should like to say that I had never been really in love with her at all; but that would be hardly true. However, I can say with perfect truth that I am very glad our engagement was broken off."

Anne made no rejoinder. She was trying—and he saw that she was trying—not to look pleased. A momentary sense of hope and exultation swept him off his mental balance, and before he could reflect upon the possible consequences of his words he had exclaimed,—

"Why shouldn't there be second thoughts, and why shouldn't second thoughts be the best, in love, as in other things? Everybody acknowledges the existence of such a sentiment as calf-love, and if one escapes the malady in early life, as I did, one may surely be attacked by it later. Or do you think that a fantastic idea?"

Anne looked slightly troubled.

"Oh, I dare say you are right," she answered hurriedly; "perhaps it doesn't so very much matter, either way. Will you write to my father about Spencer, or shall I tell him?"

Matthew said that both methods of announcing what must be announced had better, he thought, be adopted; and as soon as he was once more alone he addressed himself by a good many uncomplimentary epithets. He had done the very thing that he had made up his mind not to do; he was sure that he had been understood, and he was by no means as sure as he would fain have been that his motives for saying so much and no more were appreciated. Supposing—for mock modesty was altogether foreign to a temperament so honestly modest as his—that Anne Frere cared for him? Would she realize that he could not ask her to become the wife of a man whom her parents despised? Amongst many perplexing questions which suggested themselves to him, as he sat ruefully cogitating in his library, there was but one to which he felt able to return a decisive reply. Whatever happened, he must not tempt her to make an avowal which she would assuredly see subsequent reason to re-

gret. For the future he must keep out of her way. Friendship between them was out of the question ; he could not trust himself to keep up that pretence, nor had he the right to expose her to risks which, after all, every man and woman on earth is liable to incur under certain conditions. He at once dispatched a brief, unvarnished statement to Spencer's father ; and in the course of the afternoon a mounted messenger brought him a heavily-italicized reply from Mrs. Frere, who said she had been deputed to answer his letter, and to thank him, in her husband's name as well as her own, for the interest which he had so kindly displayed in their unfortunate son.

" Both George and I think," she wrote, " that we ought to *see* poor Spencer ; so we propose to drive over to-morrow afternoon. But pray, do not think of staying at home *yourself*, if you have other engagements, as no doubt you have. I suppose, if it is decided that Spencer is to go to Australia, he will sail at once. Otherwise, George would feel that he could not be left as a *burden* upon you any longer. I hope, if you *do* happen to be at home when we come, you will kindly make allowance for George's *irritability*. I am sure you will understand that all this has upset him a good deal ; and really, with the gout flying all over him, as it is just now, he should not be held quite *responsible* for everything that he says."

It was easy to read between the lines of this inartistic missive. Evidently the Freres did not relish the idea of being beholden to one whose acquaintance they wished to drop, while at the same time they hardly saw their way to spurn his good offices. Consequently, one of them was likely to relieve his feelings by saying very uncivil things, and the other was anxious to avert unpleasantness, if possible. Under all the circumstances, Matthew would have been more than human if he had not determined to remain at home and face them. He had done nothing of which he was ashamed, he had no reason to dread anything that might be said to him, nor

was he afraid of losing his temper. If Mr. Frere should see fit to be rude or insulting, that must be a matter between the old gentleman and his own conscience. To forgive him would be well within the capacity of a philosopher, but to run away from him was really out of the question.

It was therefore in a quietly combative mood that the old couple found their former friend, who welcomed them with much politeness, though with an unsmiling face. Mrs. Frere, as he helped her to descend from her carriage (for he had gone out to the front door to meet them), did not disguise her nervous apprehensions. She began at once to apologize profusely for the imaginary inconvenience to which they had put Mr. Austin, and hastened to say that George would rather like to see Spencer alone for a short time, if he didn't mind.

"Don't trouble about me; I can wait anywhere," she added, as if it had been her intention to seat herself upon one of the wooden chairs in the hall.

As for Mr. Frere, he looked extremely grumpy, and forgot to shake hands with his host, by whom he was suavely informed that he would find his son in the library.

"Perhaps," continued Matthew, "Mrs. Frere will allow me to offer her a cup of tea in the dining-room while you are having your talk."

But Mrs. Frere, on being conducted into that temporary place of retreat, declared that she did not want any tea. She moved quickly about the room, admiring the etchings on the walls, the view from the windows, the flowers in the garden outside, talking incessantly, and so obviously desirous of avoiding any allusion to the object of her visit that common charity forbade Matthew to make her more uncomfortable than she was. Moreover, he really did not wish for explanations which could not, in the nature of things, be satisfactory. He had a grievance, and a very legitimate one, against the Freres; but it was impossible to prove to them that he was guiltless of the offence for which they had chosen to visit him with their displeasure, and for the time being, at all

events, their situation was a considerably more embarrassing one than his own. So he good-humouredly talked commonplaces with the pretty old lady, whose appeals to his magnanimity were so thinly veiled, until her husband stumped into the room and said gruffly,—

“Now, my dear, you had better go and see Spencer.—Mr. Austin, if you can spare me five minutes, we will take a turn round the garden. There are one or two matters which must be talked over before this business can be regarded as settled.”

Matthew noticed the unaccustomed prefix to his name, and saw that Mrs. Frere had noticed it also. She threw an imploring glance at him as she moved away to obey orders, and he said to himself that he would keep cool. Why, indeed, quarrel with those who are manifestly in the wrong? He could afford to be generous, although Mr. Frere probably did not think so.

What Mr. Frere actually was thinking at that moment was that generosity is all very fine, but that—confound it all!—a man doesn't care to have it inflicted upon him until his leave has been asked. He, too, was trying to keep cool; he did not want to be rude or ungracious; still it did go very much against the grain with him to accept benefits from Matthew Austin, while there were certain benefits which neither he nor his son could possibly accept from anybody. When, therefore, he had said what had to be said in the way of thanks, he proceeded to remark,—

“But there is one point, Mr. Austin, which seems to me to require clearing up. Spencer says he knows nothing about it, but I can hardly believe that your Australian friend is willing to be burdened with a totally inexperienced man who brings him nothing in the shape of capital or premium.”

“Oh, that will be all right,” said Matthew.

“How all right? I don't know what you mean. Am I to understand that you have paid, or propose to pay, money out of your own pocket on behalf of my son?”

"My pocket is almost inconveniently full at the present time," answered Matthew, smiling.

"So I believe. Whether it has been filled in a manner particularly creditable to yourself is another question. Not that that is any business of mine."

"Really, I don't think it is," said Matthew.

"Well, I tell you that it is not my business; I acknowledge that it is not my business; I don't know what more you can expect me to say. But you will allow, perhaps, that I am the proper person to make any provision that may have to be made for my son's maintenance."

It was upon the tip of Matthew's tongue to retort that Mr. Frere had not hitherto seemed to be of that opinion; but he restrained himself, and only answered,—

"Oh, certainly."

"Very well, then; the sum, whatever it may be, will be raised—paid, I mean, by me. You meant kindly, I have no doubt; but I am surprised at your having thought that under the circumstances—however, I won't go into that. I promised my wife that I wouldn't, and I won't. We're very much obliged to you for all you have done—very much obliged indeed. At the same time, you know, it's—well, to speak plainly, Austin, for once—it's damned unpleasant!"

Hurt though he was, and badly as he felt that he had been used, Matthew could not help laughing.

"I assure you, Mr. Frere," said he, "that there is no occasion for you to consider yourself under the slightest obligation to me. Upon my word of honour, any little trouble that I may have taken has not been taken for your sake."

"My good man, I know that well enough; that's just the worst part of it! Well, I said I wouldn't allude to the subject, if I could avoid it; but how the deuce am I to avoid it? I tell you candidly, Austin—I know I ought not to say this, but I must say it—that I don't myself believe in the stories which have been circulated about you; still, there they are, and you have made no attempt to clear yourself. We can't fairly be asked to

consent to a marriage between our daughter and a man with a tarnished reputation. That's what my wife thinks, and I'm bound to say that I agree with her."

"A marriage between your daughter and me! My dear Mr. Frere, you must be under some extraordinary misapprehension. I have never for one single moment contemplated asking your consent to anything of the sort."

"Well, well, well! But we know how things are. My wife has had suspicions ever since that stupid Baxendale business, and Anne herself——"

"Do you mean to tell me that Anne herself——"

"Confound it all, sir! don't speak of my daughter by her Christian name, if you please. There! I beg your pardon, Austin. I have no business to talk to you like that; but I must ask you to give me your word that this shall go no farther. I'm not saying anything, mind you, about the match not being a good enough one and all that. I leave such nonsense to the women. Your birth is as good as our own, and if only you had kept your hands clean——"

"I understood you to say that you did not believe in the stories which have been told about me."

"Did I say so? At all events, other people believe in them; and you're ostracized, you know. I can't let my daughter marry a man who has been ostracized. Surely I'm entitled to say that much; and I can't think why the devil I should feel ashamed of saying it!"

"Shame or no shame, you may be quite sure that your daughter will not be asked to marry me, Mr. Frere," answered Matthew quietly.

The old gentleman was greatly relieved. He said, "Then let us drop the subject," and proceeded to talk for a short time about his son, in whose future good behaviour he professed himself unable to feel any confidence. Ashamed of himself he undoubtedly was, and had perhaps some reason to be; still, after his departure, Matthew could not feel very unkindly towards him. What Matthew longed to know—but could not, of course,

have asked—was the nature of the admission which Anne was said to have made to her parents.

“But, after all, why should I wish to know?” he concluded by demanding of himself. “Even if she cared for me enough to marry me—and I am almost certain that she doesn’t—I could not possibly offer myself to her. And life doesn’t consist solely of marrying and giving in marriage. Anyhow, my duty is clear enough: I must leave this place as soon as I can, and be forgotten. Perhaps I myself shall forget in time and be tolerably happy, as happiness goes. Only I must have work.”

CHAPTER XLVI.

BAD LUCK.

THE arrangements for the banishment of Spencer Frere were carried out expeditiously and without any hitch. Everybody (including Mrs. Spencer, who wrote to express her personal wishes in unequivocal terms) wanted him to go to the other side of the world and stay there; he himself was eager to be off; and one fine morning Matthew accompanied him down to Plymouth to see the last of him.

"Well," remarked the exile, as he stood upon the deck of the great steamer which was presently to bear him away towards his remote destination, "we shall never meet again, Austin, and if I could think of anything appropriate to say to you, I'd say it—in the way of thanks, I mean."

"But you have said all that could possibly be said in that way already," Matthew declared. "Besides, we may meet again before we die—who knows?"

"We certainly shall not, unless you take a trip to the Antipodes, which isn't a very likely thing to happen. I solemnly promised the governor, you know, that I wouldn't return to my native land; and there isn't a soul in my native land whom I care to see again, except you and Anne. So, you see, there's a sort of solemnity about this occasion. It's a death-bed scene, in fact, and dying men are licensed to take liberties, ain't they?"

"Fire away," answered Matthew, laughing; "you won't offend me. What is it?"

"I could answer your question if you wouldn't mind answering one of mine first. Are you still in love with Mrs. Jerome?"

"I don't mind telling you," replied Matthew, after a moment of hesitation, "that I am not."

“Very glad to hear it, because she never was worthy to black your boots. My sister Anne, if you’ll excuse my saying so, is worth all the Mrs. Jeromes alive—and there are a good many of ’em. I can’t pretend to understand you, Austin; you aren’t a bit like any other man I have ever met in my life, and you won’t talk about yourself. But I do know something about women; and what’s more to the purpose, I know something about my sister. Now, look here, Austin: don’t you play the quixotic ass. It isn’t your business to make her miserable, even if you enjoy being miserable yourself. If you want to marry her—as I hope and believe you do—marry her and have done with it.”

“I doubt whether you are acquainted with all the circumstances,” Matthew began.

“I’m acquainted with some of them, anyhow, and so is Anne. Would you turn your back upon her if some idiot or other were to accuse her of having robbed a bank or throttled an old man to get possession of his money? Of course you wouldn’t. And considering that she is of an age to know her own mind and choose her own destiny, I don’t see what particular service you will render her by leaving her in the lurch. That’s all I had to say. Don’t tell her I said so; but just ask her to be your wife, whether her mother will let her or no. If she refuses you, I’m a bigger fool than you take me for—which is putting things forcibly.”

It was upon these valedictory counsels that Matthew meditated as he journeyed homewards. Poor Spencer was undoubtedly a fool in some respects and had more than once proved himself to be such; yet out of the mouths of fools words of wisdom may occasionally proceed, and surely there is neither wisdom nor justice in allowing lies to part two people who love one another. By the time that Matthew reached Wilverton he had almost decided to pocket his pride and brave consequences which, after all, could only be considered of secondary importance.

But he did not, in the sequel, carry this half-formed

resolution into effect. He could not forget what he had said to Mr. Frere; he could not help perceiving that, although his friends at Hayes Park had abandoned their hostile attitude and made a point of speaking to him when he met them, they were by no means desirous of reverting to bygone terms of intimacy; above all, he received no sort of encouragement, direct or indirect, from Anne, who had given up attending St. Mark's Church, and who was never to be seen in Wilverton save under her mother's protecting wing. It may have been, and indeed it was, unreasonable of him to expect encouragement from her; but he was discouraged all the same, and by degrees he returned to his original conviction that the very best thing he could do would be to get rid of his house and leave the place for ever.

Now it came to pass that as he was idly perusing the newspaper one morning (for he had a great deal more spare time in these days than he wished for), his attention was arrested by a paragraph which caused him at once to forget all his own woes. The paragraph was headed "SERIOUS YACHTING FATALITY," and ran as follows: "The yacht *Cleopatra* put back into Leith harbour yesterday morning, having carried away her foremast in a squall while on her passage to the Norwegian coast. We regret to learn that this mishap to the vessel has been attended by very severe injuries to one of the gentlemen on board, Mr. Leonard Jerome, who appears to have been crushed by the falling spar, and whose condition is stated to leave little room for hope. Mrs. Jerome, who was not with her husband, was at once telegraphed for, and was expected to reach Leith last night."

Philosophers and moralists have been agreed from time immemorial that it is a part of human nature to hate those whom we have injured, and love those whom we have befriended. Perhaps that was why Matthew loved Leonard Jerome, whose claims upon his affection were not otherwise conspicuous. At any rate, he did love the man, and his first impulse was to go to his friend

forthwith. Then he reflected that they were sure to have secured the best advice, that if they had wanted him they would have sent for him, and that he had no right to intrude upon them in their trouble. Recent experiences had made Matthew somewhat morbidly diffident and distrustful, and he had a shrinking dread of being unwelcome which he had never experienced at any previous period of his life. He thought, however, that he might at least telegraph to Lilian to beg for news ; and he was upon the point of doing so when a telegram from her was delivered to him.

“ Come to us at once, if possible. Leonard is very ill, and most anxious to see you. Pray lose no time.”

Matthew lost no more time than he could help. He was in Edinburgh early the next morning, and the clocks had not yet struck nine when he arrived at the Leith hotel from which Lilian's dispatch had been sent to him. The day was dull and chilly, for what little wind there was blew from the eastward, and the prospect from the windows of the bare, comfortless parlour into which he was ushered was a dismal arrangement in leaden-grey. Matthew had not felt very sanguine throughout his journey, but now his spirits dropped to the freezing-point of despair. That stern, relentless outlook offered him no glimmer of hope ; the inevitable, inexplicable destiny of man seemed to be staring gloomily into his eyes. The old linger on after life has become a burden to them ; the young are struck down suddenly, stupidly, without rhyme or reason that we can detect ; the survivors bow their heads, let fall a few tears upon the indifferent earth, pass on, and in process of time forget. There is nothing else for them to do ; there is no consolation for them, save the certainty of ultimate oblivion, nor any key to the eternal riddle of existence. The pity of the whole business was what struck Matthew. It cannot be said that he felt any especial pity for Mrs. Leonard Jerome, whom he not unnaturally took

for a capricious, inconstant woman. Consolation, he suspected, would not keep her waiting quite as long as it detains the majority of young widows.

But he repented of these hard thoughts when the sound of the door opening and closing behind him caused him to turn his head, and when he saw her advance with slow steps and a colourless, unsmiling face. He had never seen her look quite like that before, nor was her voice the same which had once been so familiar to his ear.

"He has something to say to you," were her first words. "I don't know what it is; he refuses to tell me. But he wrote it down, in case you should not arrive in time. Oh no; he cannot recover. The doctors think he may live another day or two, and he does not seem to suffer much; but they agree that it is quite impossible to save him. One of them will be here soon, and will tell you what is the matter, if you care to know. I didn't understand all that they said—and it doesn't signify. Death is death, by whatever name they may choose to call it."

Her utter dejection softened Matthew's heart, which could never hold out against the spectacle of human suffering under any of its manifold aspects. He laid his hand upon her shoulder.

"I am so very, very sorry," he said simply.

But she drew back quickly, almost shaking him off.

"Don't be sorry for me," she returned; "there is no need to be sorry. We were not upon good terms—we had not been for a long time, and we never should have been again. He will tell you all about it, and he will tell you that it was my fault. I don't think so, but that is of no consequence now. Think what you like of me; only please don't pity me."

Was this remorse, or obduracy, or despair? Matthew, being without any data to go upon, held his peace, and presently she resumed,—

"Shall I take you to his room now? He wanted you to go to him as soon as you arrived, and nothing can do him any harm—or any good. The doctors say that his

brain will become affected soon ; but there is no sign of that yet."

She led the way up a short flight of steps, and tapped lightly on the door of a bedroom, which was opened by a white-capped nurse. Lilian, without entering, beckoned the woman out on to the landing, and said, in the dry, monotonous accents which sounded so strangely to Matthew,—

"This is Mr. Austin, who, as I told you, was expected to arrive to-day. Mr. Jerome wishes to see him alone ; so you had better leave them together until the doctor comes."

A few minutes later Matthew was sitting by the bedside of the dying man, whose cold hand was extended to him, and who seemed to be both pleased and relieved by his advent. The man was unquestionably dying ; that much Matthew's experienced eye would have perceived even if the statement made in a hurried whisper by the nurse before she opened the door had left him any room for doubt upon the point. But it was in a clear, unflinching voice that Leonard said,—

"Well, old man, this is bad luck, isn't it ? I haven't had much luck since I married, and that's the truth—haven't deserved any, I dare say. Some people might call it a judgment upon me ; but I don't suppose you will. No ; if I had never served you a worse turn than I did two years ago, it wouldn't have been necessary to bring you all this long way and—and confess to you as I must before I die that I have behaved like a cowardly scoundrel to my best friend."

"I don't for a moment believe that you have done anything of the sort," Matthew answered. "At all events, if you have ever injured me, either at the time you speak of or at another time, you may be quite sure that you are forgiven. Let us say no more about me. I want to speak to you about your wife. What is wrong between you, Leonard ?"

"We'll come to that presently, if you insist upon it, though you're a bit too late to act the peacemaker, I'm

afraid. First of all, I must tell you something that ought to make you hate me, if it doesn't." He drew a long breath, and then said, "It was I who killed Uncle Richard."

"It has once or twice crossed my mind that that might have been so," observed Matthew quietly. "Of course you don't mean that you killed him in the literal sense of the words."

"I don't mean that I murdered him; I caused his death. I went up to his room that afternoon after you had met me and advised me to go to him—do you remember?—and he did his very best to make me lose my temper. I wish to God he hadn't succeeded!—but he did succeed; and the end of it was that I caught him by the arms and shook him. I suppose the shock must have brought on one of his heart attacks, for he died the next minute. It was a blackguardly thing to do, if you like; but of course I never meant to do it, and it wasn't half as blackguardly as what I did afterwards."

"What did you do afterwards?"

"How do you mean? You know what I did. At the time it didn't occur to me that anybody except myself could possibly be accused of having killed the old man; but I thought I might be accused, and I was frightened; so I fled out of doors. Nobody knew that I had been with him; all I had to do was to hold my tongue. Later on I heard how infamously you had been slandered; but I hadn't the courage to tell the truth then. I doubt whether I should have the courage to tell it now, if I didn't know that my hours were numbered. After me the deluge! One comfort is that nobody except my sister will be put to shame when my confession is made public."

"You forget your wife. For her sake, this must never be made public."

"My wife, I assure you, is not very proud of her husband; she will be enchanted to hear that she had better reasons than she knew of for despising him. Anyhow, your character must be cleared, and the whole story is

written down and signed. Here it is," added Leonard, holding up a sealed envelope, addressed to "Matthew Austin, Esq." "I was afraid you might not reach this place in time for me to ask your pardon by word of mouth; but they tell me I may linger on for a week or more now. Is there any use in my asking for your pardon, Austin?"

The question was superfluous; perhaps in his heart he knew that it was. Of all men in the world, Matthew was the least likely to turn a deaf ear to a petition which, however tardy, could scarcely have been refused by any mortal of average humanity. But it may be that the scapegoat exceeded the limits of strict veracity a little when he said,—

"My dear fellow, you were the victim of circumstances. In all probability I should have acted just as you did if I had been situated as you were. One makes a single false step, and it becomes out of the question to retrace it; to have come forward and stated that you were the cause of your uncle's death at the time when those ridiculous reports were circulated about me would have been to stir up endless scandal. The good ladies of Wilverton, you may depend upon it, would never have accepted your version of the affair; they would have wanted to have you arrested for murder there and then, and the chances are that I should have been accused of having participated in the crime."

"Yes, I thought of that—I did indeed!" exclaimed Leonard eagerly.

"So that you see how little good there would be in starting a fresh nine days' wonder now. Let us drop the subject. It is already stale, even in Wilverton; and, as I think I remember saying to you once before, I don't set any great store upon the good opinion of the Wilvertonians."

"Yes," sighed Leonard, "you said so once before, and I persuaded myself that I might keep my secret without doing you much harm. But even if you don't publish that written statement of mine, you must promise me to show it to the Freres and old Mrs. Jennings and a few

others. I dare say that will be sufficient ; only I couldn't die in peace if I thought you had any idea of continuing to screen me at your own expense. It's just the sort of thing that you *would* do, Austin."

"Make your mind easy," answered Matthew, after remaining silent for a moment ; "I will not hesitate to use the paper when my interests seem to require that I should use it. A far more important question is whether you will be able to die in peace while you are still at variance with your wife. I don't know what she may have done ; but——"

"Oh, she hasn't done anything particular," interrupted Leonard ; "she has left a good many things undone, and I tell you frankly that I believe we should have had to arrange an amicable separation if I had lived ; but there is no actual quarrel between us—none of my seeking, anyhow—and she has done all she possibly could for me since she came here. She will marry again after a bit, and I dare say she will be happy ; I'm sure I hope so. She certainly would never have been happy again with me, nor I with her."

He was about to say something more when his interlocutor checked him by a quiet, warning gesture. Lilian had stolen softly into the room, and, standing by the bedside, must have overheard her husband's last words—Lilian, with pale, impassive face and heavy-lidded eyes. Matthew at once rose and slipped out through the open door, which he closed behind him. A reconciliation was much more likely to be promoted by his withdrawal than by any active intervention on his part, he thought.

CHAPTER XLVII.

AN END AND A BEGINNING.

MATTHEW did not see Lilian again until after midday. During the interim he had the advantage of a short talk with his Scottish colleagues, whose information sufficed to remove any lingering doubts that he may have cherished as to the hopeless condition of their patient. The poor young man was doomed, they said; it could only be a question of days now; and perhaps, for his sake, it was almost to be regretted that he had not been killed outright.

In such regrets Matthew could scarcely participate. Apart from his wish and belief that the husband and wife might compose their differences before death should sever their marriage bond, he had reasons of his own, and very cogent ones, for being thankful that Leonard had lived long enough to write and sign a certain document. Yet, notwithstanding the promise that he had made, he was by no means certain yet that he could ever use that document. Unquestionably, he had a right to clear his character; other and far more important things than the restored esteem of the Wilverton ladies and the recovery of the Wilverton practice might depend upon his ability to do so. But perhaps, as Spencer Frere had affirmed, he was a quixotic ass. Anyhow, the more he thought of it the less he relished the idea of bringing disgrace upon the memory of a dead friend. Disgrace, unfortunately, must be involved in the revelation of what Leonard had done; since the culprit had, by his own admission, been guilty of cowardice and deceit, in addition to the original offence which, if only it had been avowed in time, would doubtless have been condoned. And then there was his wife to be thought of, not to

speak of the fond sister who had always been so proud of him.

"It looks to me as if I should have to let him off," was Matthew's conclusion. "Perhaps it isn't such a very enormous sacrifice to make, after all; for Anne has never believed any ill of me, and, in spite of her brother, I can't think that she has ever cared for me, except as a friend. Upon the whole, I suspect that I should feel a good deal more comfortable if I were to say nothing about this. Yes; we poor mortals are so constituted that we study our own comfort even when we seem to be most unselfish. There isn't a great deal of difference between any of us, and I don't know what business we have to throw up our hands and our eyes when one or other of us happens to fall a little below the conventional standard."

These abstract reflections, which were probably prompted by a desire to make some excuse for Lilian, whom in his heart he found it a little difficult to pardon, were interrupted by the entrance of Leonard's yachting friends—sunburnt gentlemen in blue serge clothes, whose concerned faces and anxious inquiries testified to the sincerity of their sorrow at the mishap which had befallen their shipmate. They shook their heads sadly when they were told that nothing could be done, saying it was a bad job. One of them remarked that Mrs. Jerome seemed to take it pretty coolly; but this was felt to be an observation of doubtful taste, and he was not encouraged to proceed further, although it was evident that his companions shared the opinion of Leonard's wife which he had refrained from expressing. They lingered on for some little time, until at length the door was opened to admit Lilian herself, whereupon they scurried away like so many rabbits. Had they paused to scrutinize her, they would have seen that she did not wear a particularly alarming aspect, and indeed neither their presence nor their headlong flight struck her as worthy of notice.

"He has dropped off to sleep," she said. "The nurse

thinks drowsiness is a bad sign, though I don't see why anything should be called a bad sign, now we know that he must die. It seems to have been a relief to him to have had his talk with you."

"And I hope it has been a relief to him to have had a talk with you too," Matthew ventured to return.

"Oh, we didn't talk much," she answered, sitting down on the nearest chair and clasping her hands loosely on her lap, as she stared with lack-lustre eyes upon the dreary prospect outside; "there wasn't much to talk about."

So there had been no reconciliation after all. It seemed such a pity, and Lilian's apathy was so evidently due to despair, not to indifference, that Matthew could not resist saying,—

"I should have thought there might have been a great deal."

He obtained no response; but presently she asked,—

"May I know what it was that he was so anxious to tell you?"

"Well, I would rather not say. It was a matter between ourselves."

"Had it anything to do with me?"

"Nothing at all, except in so far as that his affairs are your affairs—or would be, if you cared for him."

"I care for him more than for anything or anybody else in the world," she replied quietly; "if I could make him well and strong again now by dying in his place, I would die gladly and thankfully. But I cannot do that, and nothing that I could say or do would make any difference in the fact that he does not love me. He was in love with my face for two or three months, I think; then it was all over."

"Are you quite sure that you have the right to say that?"

"Perfectly sure. Do you think it would be worth while to say things for the sake of being contradicted now? Perhaps you don't know that when he started off on his yachting trip he left me literally without a

home to go to. I was to travel abroad, or settle myself in some watering-place, or stay with my friends while he was away; he didn't care what became of me, so long as I was not with him. I don't tell you this by way of reproaching him; I only want you to understand, if you can, to what a pass things had come. Even you, optimistic as you are, must acknowledge that no man would treat a woman whom he loved in that way."

"I think he might, if he were offended or jealous. Of course I don't say that he would be justified in doing it; but one forgives everything to those who are upon the point of death."

"As if there could be the slightest difficulty in forgiving jealousy! Leonard was never jealous; though I tried to make him so at one time. He was rather annoyed, or he said he was, about Mr. Vawdrey; but that was only because he was afraid of being made ridiculous—not because he had the least objection to my amusing myself, within recognized limits, as he himself did. You have heard about Mr. Vawdrey, I dare say."

"Not very much. I wish you would tell me something about him."

"He is the only friend I have in the world—unless I may call you my friend still. He is very fond of me, and has been very good to me—too fond of me, as you would probably think, and too good to run away with me, as I almost asked him to do when I heard that I was to be deserted. I don't spare myself, you see; I don't want to make out that I am any better than I am. Only after what I have said, you must see that what has parted Leonard and me is not an ordinary quarrel which can be made up in the ordinary way. Besides, he doesn't wish for anything of the sort."

"Yet you own that you love him."

"I don't think I said that; I said I cared more for him than for anybody else in the world, and that I would die to save his life—which is the truth. But if you were to tell me—and oh, I wish, I *wish* you could!—that there was still some hope for him, and if he were

to recover and be himself again, the love that I had for him once would never come back to me. I know people say that love is always a one-sided business ; but I don't believe it. At any rate, I am sure that it can't be so in my case. That was why I treated you so badly ; it wasn't that I had any doubt about your being Leonard's superior. Kindness and indulgence and commonplace domestic affection are of no use to me ; I want something more. I want something that is not to be had, you will say. Very likely—only I can't do without it. A good many women are like that, I should think, though perhaps no man is."

As Matthew made no rejoinder (for in truth he could hit upon none worth making), she resumed presently,—

"I haven't made you understand ; you still think that I have given Leonard some cause for complaint, and that I ought to beg his pardon. Well, I did beg him to forgive me yesterday : he has something to forgive, of course."

"And what did he say ? "

"He said, ' Oh, all right ! ' and then he hoped I didn't consider it necessary to make a scene because he was dying. So there was no scene, until his sister came and treated us to one. Did I tell you that Lady Bannock arrived from the Highlands yesterday ? She had to go back to Edinburgh in the evening, I forget why ; but she will be here again soon, and then you will be assured that I am to blame for everything that has happened. It was I, it seems, who made Leonard's life so unhappy that he was obliged to sail for Norway to escape from me."

Matthew could only remain silent. It seemed to him extremely probable that Lady Bannock's accusation was well founded, and if his sympathies were to some extent with Lilian, he nevertheless felt that at such a time she might have made believe a little. In the presence of death, don't we all make believe a little—all except, perhaps, the poor dying fellow-mortal ? Her quick feminine perception divined his thought, and she said,—

"You must not imagine that Leonard would die more happily if I were to tell him untruths. I made the attempt yesterday—because, as you know, I would do anything for him—but it was a complete failure. The only thing that he really wanted was to see you before he died, and now he is satisfied. He said just now that he was satisfied, and that he had squared accounts with you. You won't tell me what he meant, but I think I can guess."

"Can you?" asked Matthew, slightly taken aback.

"Yes; I know that you lent him money once, and I suppose he has never repaid you. I was very unhappy and very angry about it at the time; now it seems a small thing." She walked to the window, where she stood for a minute or two, gazing vacantly down upon the grey thoroughfare, with its continuous ebb and flow of traffic, and its throng of hurrying, preoccupied pedestrians. Presently she said, "Here comes Lady Bannock, with a pile of luggage. I think I will go back to Leonard and leave you to receive her. Perhaps, if you can manage it, you might persuade her that there is no use in upbraiding me. I don't particularly mind; only it makes a noise, and it does no good."

A few minutes later Lady Bannock was ushered into the room. Her hat was on one side, her eyelids were red and swollen with weeping, she was evidently smarting under that sense of undeserved injury which happy and prosperous people can hardly help experiencing when overtaken by the woes which are common to our race.

"O Mr. Austin," she exclaimed, with comic pathos, "why didn't you marry that woman? From the first I had a presentiment that she would be the ruin of poor dear Leonard—and now you see! Why are such cruel things allowed to happen?"

Matthew could not answer a question which has puzzled the learned and the patient from time immemorial; but he found Lady Bannock a much easier person to deal with than Lilian had been. A doctor

soon learns how to calm the agitation of the clamorously afflicted, and ordinary methods fitted the case of this disconsolate lady. He let her have her breath out, he heard all about Lilian's obstinate unreasonableness, he listened submissively to the whole history of the Vawdrey episode, and then he set to work to soothe the complaint.

"Well," said Lady Bannock, at length, "I won't quarrel with her; I won't speak to her at all, if I can help it; but I shall always feel that it is she who has killed my brother. Still, no doubt you know her better than I do; and perhaps, as you say, there may be her side of the question. It does seem very hard, though, that *everything* should have gone wrong with him since his marriage. I can't think why you should have encouraged it as you did."

Matthew kept his countenance, and diverted the conversation by degrees into more practical channels. Lady Bannock was not really wanted, nor could she be of any service to her brother; but he found something for her to do, and soon persuaded her that she was indispensable. Thus the peace was kept, and conflicts were avoided during the trying days that followed.

Leonard Jerome was a strong man, although he had not of late been a very healthy one, and he lingered on, in a state of semi-consciousness, for nearly a week. Once or twice his eyes rested with a troubled look upon Matthew; but he never spoke intelligibly again, nor did he bestow any sign of recognition upon his wife, who nursed him assiduously up to the end. That was the least that she could do, Lady Bannock said. It was likewise the most that she could do, and she did it in such a manner as to earn the praise and admiration of the doctors. One doctor, who knew her rather better than they did, would have admired her more had she displayed a little more feeling; but Matthew Austin, it is to be feared, will never be able to judge Lilian Jerome with strict impartiality. For the rest, he always has been, and still is, ready to fight her battles.

When all was over, he did what had to be done for

her in a quiet, business-like way ; so that she scarcely knew of how many painful duties and harrowing discussions she had been relieved by his thoughtfulness. She was half stunned ; she had not the faintest idea of what she ought to do or of what her future life was to be, and she obtained neither comfort nor counsel from Lady Bannock, by whom Matthew took care that she should not be disturbed. It was Matthew who secured a reserved compartment for her on her melancholy southward journey ; it was he who contrived that quarters should be ready for her at Stanwick Vicarage (the hall being in the occupation of strangers), and it was he who made all the necessary arrangements for the funeral. She simply obeyed his instructions, as a child might have done, and thought no more of thanking him than a child thinks of thanking its nurse. Lord Bannock, who had been summoned in haste by his wife, was not less willing to leave the management of details in the hands of this capable person. His lordship said frankly that he didn't like ghastly jobs, and that he supposed doctors were accustomed to being mixed up with undertakers and coffins and horrors of that sort.

It was on a fine summer day that the remains of the last representative of the Jerome family were deposited in the vault where his ancestors' bones lay. Except during the brief period that we know of, he had been a non-resident landlord, and had seen little either of his neighbours or of the few tenants upon a shrunken property ; but sympathy or the desire to witness a somewhat imposing ceremony brought many mourners and carriages to swell the *cortège*, while from more distant parts of England came quite a respectable number of gentlemen amongst whom Leonard had been popular, and who were anxious to give evidence of the regret with which they had heard of his untimely death.

These were received by Lord and Lady Bannock at the railway hotel, where they had found temporary shelter. Matthew was not troubled with them, his task being to see that Lilian should be safely escorted to the

church under the wing of the vicar's wife, and that she should be spared as much as possible from intrusion or curious scrutiny. But when the prolonged and mournful rite was over, when Lilian, who had borne herself with apparent composure throughout, and who had never once lifted her heavy crape veil, had been led away, and when the mourners were dispersing, he was touched on the elbow by a fair-complexioned young man, who said,—
“You are Mr. Austin, are you not? Might I speak to you for a minute?”

“Of course,” answered Matthew. And then, after a second glance at the other, “Perhaps your name is Vawdrey?”

The young man nodded, reddening slightly.

“I dare say Mrs. Jerome may have mentioned me to you,” he said. “I wasn’t invited to come here to-day, only——”

“I am sure Mrs. Jerome will think it very kind of you to have come,” Matthew declared. “Many of poor Jerome’s friends have travelled a long way, uninvited, to pay this last tribute of respect to his memory.”

“Well, I can’t say that he was exactly a friend of mine,” Vawdrey confessed. “Are you going to walk back? If so, perhaps you would let me walk with you.”

Matthew at once assented, and presently the two men left the main road, striking across country by a field path which, if it did not lead directly to the railway station, at least secured them that freedom from observation which one of them desired.

“I was saying,” resumed Vawdrey, “that Jerome was no friend of mine, and I’m bound to add that I had no respect for him either. Of course, it’s sad that he should have been killed like that; but——”

“Before you go any further,” interrupted Matthew, “I must tell you that he was a friend of mine, and that I was very fond of him. No doubt he had his faults, and his married life was not happy; still, all that is over now. I would rather not talk about the subject.

Besides, it was about Mrs. Jerome, not about him, that you wished to speak, was it not ? ”

“ Well, yes ; I wanted to ask you whether you knew anything of her plans. The fact is that I have a message to give her from my mother ; only I don’t quite see how I am to deliver it. We are very anxious—at least my mother and my sisters are—that Mrs. Jerome should go down to my place in Lincolnshire for a bit, unless she has made some other arrangement. We think she might be glad of the rest and the absolute privacy ; because it is rather a large house, and she could have her own rooms, where nobody would disturb her. I myself am going off to America next week, and I don’t expect to be home again much before the winter. Do you think she could be prevailed upon to come ? ”

“ I should think she might,” answered Matthew, smiling ; “ at any rate, I will give her your message. Unfortunately, she has very few friends ; and I suppose, from what you say, that Mrs. Vawdrey must be one of the few.”

“ Oh yes ; my mother is devoted to her, and—and awfully sorry for her. I don’t want to say anything against Jerome, now that he is dead—especially if he was a friend of yours ; but really I don’t see how anybody could have been a friend of hers without being sorry for her.”

“ Oh, I am sorry for her. She is very much alone in the world, and where she will settle eventually I can’t tell ; probably she herself has hardly faced that question yet. For the present I believe she is going to some cousins of hers who have asked her to stay with them, but I dare say she will be glad to accept Mrs. Vawdrey’s invitation later on. Shall I say that your mother will write to her ? ”

Mrs. Vawdrey, it seemed, had not neglected that customary formality. Her son produced a bulky envelope from his pocket which he said that he would himself have handed to Mrs. Jerome had he not been afraid of intruding upon her. And he was particularly

anxious that she should be informed of his imminent departure for the United States.

"If she goes to my mother, she shan't see a soul whom she doesn't want to see all the time she is there," he promised.

Matthew could not help laughing.

"Perhaps," he remarked, "by the time that you come back from the United States she may want to see you."

"Do you mean that?" asked Vawdrey a little breathlessly. "Do you really think that some day—of course not now, but *some* day—she would let me have a chance of proving to her that all men are not such black—ahem!—that all men are not so extraordinarily blind as Jerome was?"

"Why not? Women are not very comprehensible to me, and Mrs. Jerome is even more complicated, as a study, than the general run of her sex; but I should say that what she and they chiefly insist upon is unconditional adoration. If you can give her that—and make her wait a few months for it—you will earn her esteem, and all other things will probably be added unto you. However, this is a purely academic opinion; you must take it for what it is worth."

"You evidently don't know much about her, or you wouldn't speak of her in that nasty, sneering way," returned Vawdrey, slightly affronted.

Nevertheless, when he reached the railway station, he shook this cynical doctor warmly by the hand, and he took away with him a somewhat lighter heart than had beat beneath his waistcoat earlier in the day. Hope springs eternal in the human breast; Mrs. Jerome could not, in the nature of things, mourn very long for a husband who had made her life miserable, and it was at least some comfort to feel sure that if Matthew Austin had been enamoured of her once, he was enamoured of her no more. Benevolent or cynical, the man was not to be dreaded as a rival; and that was the very point as to which Vawdrey had hitherto felt a little doubtful.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

THE FALL OF THE CURTAIN.

"OH, I know what you think," Lilian said that evening. "You mean to be extremely kind, but you can't help looking upon me as a 'case,' and you foresee a remedy which will settle everything satisfactorily. All the same, it is not because I am going to adopt your remedy that I have decided to accept Mrs. Vawdrey's invitation; it is only because I like her, and because I want to get away from people who know my whole history. I want to rest and collect my wits, and form some scheme of life for the future.

"That is quite understood," answered Matthew gravely. "I only gave you the message that I promised to give. No doubt you will have left Lincolnshire long before Mr. Vawdrey returns from his travels."

"Yes; and very likely he will change his mind in the course of his travels. But you know what he wants now, and you think it would be an excellent thing for everybody concerned if he were to get it. I am not sure that Mrs. Vawdrey would agree with you though. Oh, what a complicated world it is, and how I wish I had never been sent into it!"

"We must make the best of a state of existence which was conferred upon us without our consent having been asked or obtained," observed Matthew philosophically. "For the great majority of human beings life means something very much worse than it can ever mean for you or me."

"How do you know? It would be terrible for you or me to live in the neighbourhood of the Seven Dials; but suicides are not more common amongst the people who do live there than in our own class, are they?"

We are just as unhappy as they are when things go askew with us, and I don't see how things can possibly go straight again in my case. However, I won't weary you with my sorrows. You wouldn't believe in them; or if you did, you would set them down as merely sentimental sorrows, not to be named in the same breath with hunger or disease."

It was true that Matthew could feel no great pity for the young widow. He was tolerably certain that she would end by marrying a man who not only loved her, but was a thoroughly good fellow, and was rich enough to provide her with every material luxury into the bargain. If it came to a question of pity, he thought he knew somebody rather more deserving of compassion than she could claim to be. Pale, listless, and despondent though she was, he was unable to believe that the memory of her first unhappy marriage would cast a permanent shadow over her life. And in this it must be owned that he judged her rightly. Lilian's grief was deeper and likely to prove somewhat more enduring than he supposed; but she was still very young. It is only when youth has departed that Melancholy makes herself at home with us, knowing that we shall not try very hard to drive her away.

As for that other person whose case seemed to be less hopeful than hers, Matthew had never been wont to expend much pity or sympathy upon him. With good health, with work to do, and with a lively interest in the monotonous yet ever-changing drama of contemporary existence, a man has no business to sit down and groan. Nevertheless, after he had journeyed with Lilian on the morrow as far as the junction where their routes diverged, and after he had shifted his travelling-bag into an empty smoking-carriage, he did for once give up an hour or so to being sorry for himself. His really was, as Leonard might have called it, bad luck—bad not so much because he was precluded from ever telling Anne Frere that he loved her as because it had been so very nearly within his power to make that avowal. In

his pocket he had a document which, if made public, would re-establish his fair fame—a document which the writer had both permitted and requested him to make public—a document which, if it would not of necessity procure the fulfilment of his wishes, would at least entitle him to state them without fear or hesitation. And for whose sake did he propose to suppress this invaluable proof of his integrity? For the sake of one whom “slander, censure rash” could no longer touch, who “had finished joy and moan”? For the sake of Lilian, whose dead love for the dead man had never been combined with respect, and to whom consolation was already beckoning?

“It seems queer,” reflected Matthew, with a rueful grimace, “but I suppose the actual truth is that I am going to turn my back upon all sorts of pleasant hopes for my own sake. Put it how you will, there are things which can’t be done without self-contempt, and kicking the body of a dead friend is one of them. The fact that poor Leonard is beyond reach of being hurt by any indignities makes no real difference.”

In this way he strove to convince himself, and finally did almost convince himself, that, since he was only going to do what he wished to do, he had nothing to grumble about. Of course, after he had reached home, and had begun to make preparations for quitting the old house which had grown dear to him, he had some moments of bitter regret; of course, too, there were moments when he wished that Leonard had chosen another method of making posthumous reparation than that of addressing a confession to “Matthew Austin, Esquire.” He had not quite heroism or stoicism enough to rejoice that a responsibility had been thrown upon him which might so easily have been handed over to somebody else. Still, having made up his mind, he never thought of changing it; nor was he tempted to do so by the only form of temptation which would have been hard to resist.

For Anne Frere remained invisible; although, if the

truth must be confessed, he went a little out of his way to haunt those districts of the town and country in which there was a reasonable probability of encountering her. That she and her parents must have heard of his impending departure seemed certain. He had placed his house in the hands of an agent, his furniture was advertised for sale, and Dr. Jennings, amongst other neighbours, had not failed to express, in *agro-dolce* accents, his regret that Mr. Austin had determined to abandon a lucrative practice, together with some discreet curiosity as to Mr. Austin's motives for so doing. In provincial circles everybody knows all about everybody else; the Freres could hardly be unaware of the bereavement which was in store for Wilverton; and, since they did not see fit to go through the formality of declaring their sorrow, it could only be presumed that they had no sorrow to declare. For the matter of that, it was but natural that the old people should rejoice to be delivered from an embarrassing vicinity; Mr. Frere had been perfectly frank upon the subject, and had perhaps been only partially reassured by the assertion which his frankness had elicited. But Anne, who had once proclaimed herself Matthew's friend after a somewhat unusual and unconventional fashion, might surely, if she had wished to do so, have found some means of letting him know that he had done nothing to forfeit her friendship.

In any case, he could not go away without bidding her good-bye: amongst the many solaces which he had resolved to deny himself, the melancholy one of holding her hand in his for the last time was not one. So, when the day which he had fixed upon for his final retirement from those familiar scenes was near, he drove out to Hayes Park, inwardly determining that, if Mrs. Frere should not be at home, he would leave a note to ask when he might call again, for the purpose above named.

But Mrs. Frere was at home, and was, or professed to be, very glad to see him. She had been intending, she said, to write him a note ever since she had heard that

he was leaving Wilverton, and to beg that he would not go without paying them a farewell visit; but she knew how horribly busy he must have been. Packing up was always such heart-breaking and back-breaking work; it was really no kindness to thrust oneself upon one's friends when they were engaged in that way. "You are going to London, of course. Well, I can't wonder at your preferring civilization to stagnation; I have felt from the first that you were altogether thrown away down here. Though you will be dreadfully missed, no doubt, and what George will do the next time that he is ill I can't imagine, for he swears that nothing will induce him to call Dr. Jennings in again. Perhaps somebody nice may come in your place; one can but hope so."

To all this volubility Matthew, with his elbows on his knees and his hat balanced by the brim between his long fingers, listened smilingly. It was impossible to be angry with Mrs. Frere; it was even impossible to watch her without a certain feeling of admiration and envy. That she was neither comfortable nor happy was evident; but that she did not intend to increase her unhappiness and discomfort by permitting her visitor to embark upon painful explanations was quite equally so. In vain Matthew attempted to reply that he had no present intention of settling in London, that he was without definite plans, that he thought of wandering about the Continent for a time, and so forth. She sheltered herself behind her deafness, pretended to think that he was weary of Wilverton, and quite agreed with him that he might do far better elsewhere. Any special reasons that he might have for severing his connection with a place where he had been doing tolerably well she tacitly begged him to ignore, and ordinary good manners imposed compliance with her request upon him.

After a time Mr. Frere came in, and showed himself less placidly bent upon making the best of things and steering clear of possible unpleasantnesses than his wife. He said,—

"All I can tell you is that I'm devilish sorry you're going, Austin; though I can't honestly pretend that I should have wished you to stay on. Well, well!—least said soonest mended, no doubt; only it does seem to me that you have been victimized by the wrong-headedness of a parcel of silly women.—You needn't trouble to make faces at me, my dear; Austin knows very well what I mean, and he won't misunderstand me. He doesn't answer, you see—and quite right too.—What about that poor little Mrs. Jerome, Austin? We heard of all your kindness to her, and we weren't surprised. We ought to know, if anybody does, that you are made up of kindness to people who don't deserve it, most of 'em."

In answer to further inquiries, Matthew related the whole story of Leonard's accident and death, dilating at greater length than was necessary upon the financial and other prospects of the widow, because, all the time that he was talking, he had a hope that Anne would presently enter the room. But this hope was not fulfilled, and at last he had to take his leave.

"Please say good-bye for me to Miss Frere and to Maggie," were his last words. "I am sorry not to have seen them and made my adieus in person."

"They will be very sorry too," returned Mrs. Frere amiably. "Maggie is away for a week, staying with some friends, and Anne has gone out for a walk, I believe; but I will certainly deliver your message to them. Good-bye, dear Mr. Austin; don't forget us, and if you should ever find yourself in these parts again——"

"Yes?" said Matthew, rather cruelly.

"But I am afraid you never will; there is really nothing to bring you here. Good-bye."

Thus was Matthew plainly given to understand that the curtain had fallen upon the last act of the Wilverton drama. He had had no business to expect anything else, and he felt that it was rather silly to tell his groom to drive home, alleging that he preferred to walk. Still, since just a chance remained, why should he deprive him-

self of it ? It took him a long time to stroll across the park, and when he reached the stile where—as he remembered with a pang of regret and with half-amused wonderment at all that had happened since—he had once parted from Anne on a frosty, starry night, he was in no great hurry to pursue his way along the dusty high-road. Not that delay was likely to be of any service to him ; he would have met her before now if he had been going to meet her at all. Moreover, nothing could be more obvious than that she did not wish to meet him.

He was still wondering what her objection could be to bidding an unobtrusive and unsentimental friend God-speed when she emerged from the shadow of the neighbouring hedgerow with a suddenness which took his breath away. He had not heard the sound of her footsteps upon the wayside grass, nor, of course, had she expected to find her path barred by a stooping, masculine form ; so that she was quite as much startled as he was, and for an instant they both remained foolishly speechless.

But the necessity of saying something could not be eluded for more than an instant. He explained that he had been calling upon her parents to say good-bye, and she remarked that she had been down to the village to buy some stamps. A somewhat strained conversation followed, in the course of which Matthew was once more called upon to furnish particulars of his journey to Scotland, and which Anne wound up by observing that it was time for her to move on towards home. But this was more than Matthew could stand.

“ Miss Frere,” he said, “ I am going clean away out of your life, and, as far as I can see, the chances are against our ever meeting again. Won’t you let me have the memory of some pleasant speech to take with me ? Your father was more generous. He said he was sorry—devilish sorry, in fact—that I was leaving ; although—”

“ Oh, don’t ! ” interrupted Anne, in a pained voice ; “ I would much rather not hear what he said. I know what he said to you that afternoon before Spencer went

away, and I have been ashamed to look you in the face ever since. I thought you would have understood."

Matthew forced himself to laugh.

"Oh, that was only nonsense," he answered steadily. "Of course I understood that it was nonsense."

"I could not feel at all sure that you would think so; it must have sounded very like sense. You knew that I had refused Sir William Baxendale—you knew that I had even gone, alone and uninvited, to your house to assure you that Maggie and I still believed in you, whatever other people might say; if you had drawn your own conclusions nobody could have blamed you. It never struck me that I had done anything out of the way, or—or anything that could be misconstrued, until I heard what had passed between you and my father. I wanted very much to see you again and say good-bye, and thank you once more for all your great kindness to us; but, after that, how could I? My only hope was that you would realize the impossibility, and that you would not think me ungrateful. I scarcely dared to hope that you would see what an absurd delusion my father was labouring under."

Matthew began to say, in a cheerful, matter-of-fact tone, that delusions of that kind, though not unnatural, were sufficiently obvious to a man who had not parted with all vestige of common-sense; but he did not end his sentence as he had proposed to do. He ended it in quite a different manner, being completely thrown off his mental balance by Anne's hasty clutch at her pocket-handkerchief and by the discovery that tears were running down her cheeks. How did it come to pass that the next moment he was holding her in his arms, and that, although scarcely an intelligible word had been exchanged between them, there was no need of words to bring about entire mutual comprehension? This is a question which neither he nor Anne could answer at the present day if put upon their oaths; but indeed there is no reason at all why they should wish to answer it. What at the time seemed to one of them to be of paramount

importance was that he should point out how far his intentions were from being what is commonly called honourable. Honour, according to his notions and assertion, rendered it imperative upon a disgraced man to remove himself forthwith from the neighbourhood and never be heard of again. He could not ask Mr. Frere to consent to a union which that gentleman would never sanction, nor would it be fair to throw upon his wife any share in the burden of his supposed guilt.

"As if I should let you leave me!" Anne exclaimed, laughing through her tears. "It is bad enough that I should have loved you all this long time and tried to deceive myself and you without a shadow of success; now that I am already humbled to the dust, it isn't any small additional effrontery that will scare me. I am of age; I can marry whom I please; and even if my father and mother raise objections for form's sake—but I doubt whether they will—they will be obliged to give in with a good grace. As for that ridiculous slander about poor old Mr. Litton's death, I believe it is almost forgotten by this time."

"Only I can't clear myself of suspicion."

"Have I ever asked you to clear yourself? And has anybody else the right to ask that of you?"

Matthew meditated for a moment, and then drew Leonard's letter from his pocket.

"No," he answered, "I am not sure that anybody else has the right, but I think you have. Will you read this, Anne, and will you give me your word of honour never to breathe a word of what you have read, except to me?"

She gave the required pledge unhesitatingly, and, after she had slowly perused the document, handed it back.

"I understand," she said. "I won't pretend that I should have been so generous in your place; but I love you and admire you all the more for your generosity."

"And you are still willing to brave the risk of hearing your husband called a criminal?"

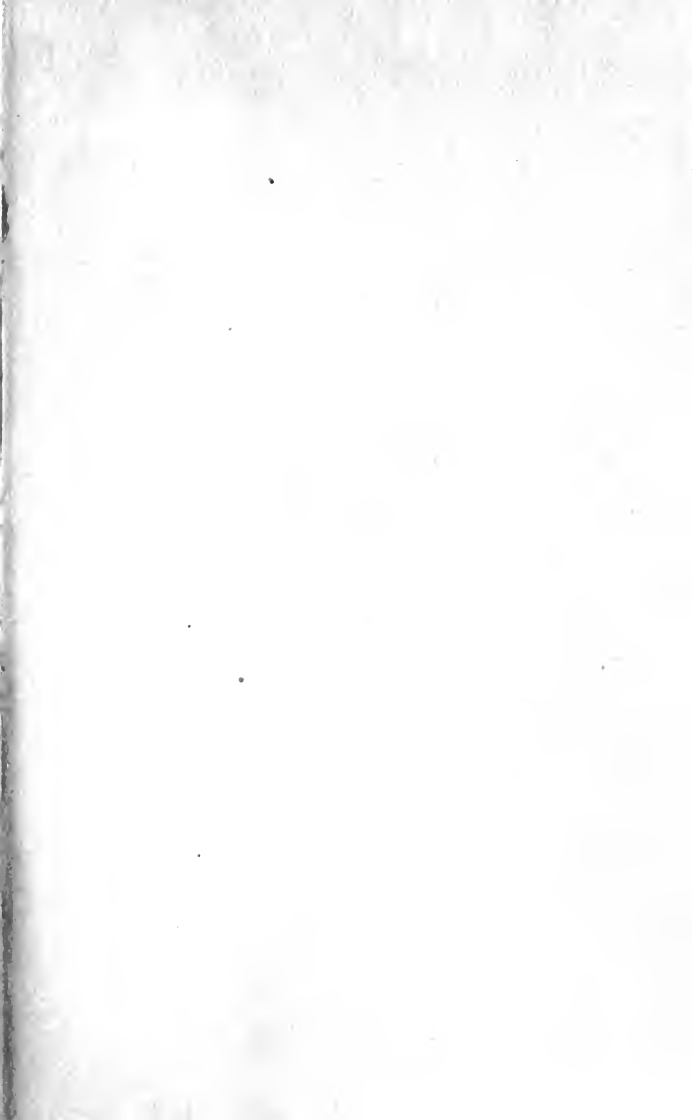
"I don't think," answered Anne, "that any one will

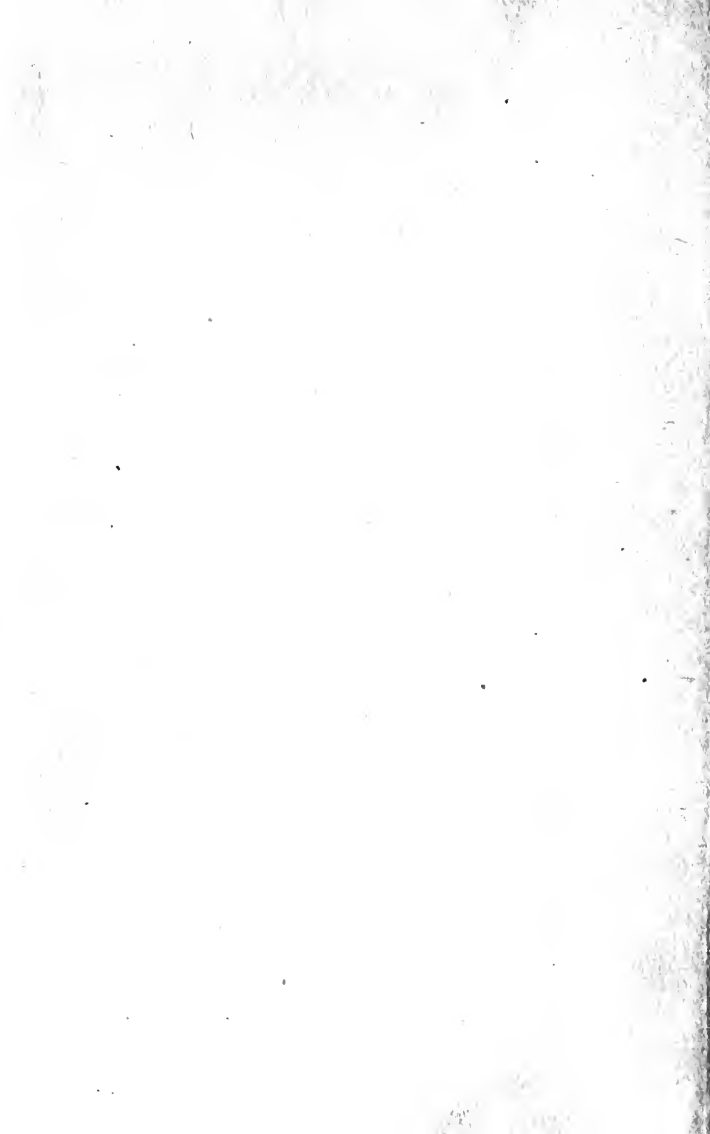
ever dare to speak of my husband by that name when I am present, and I am quite certain that no one will ever dare to do it twice."

So, with laughter, and with a few tears, this couple sealed a compact which has never been, nor ever will be, broken ; and Leonard Jerome's confession, after having been torn into a hundred pieces, was scattered to the four winds of heaven. Mrs. Jennings is of opinion that those poor Freres were glad enough to bestow their daughter upon a man so well able to provide for her, however dubious may have been the methods by which a part of his fortune was acquired ; but Mrs. Jennings is comparatively harmless in these days. Wilverton, as a whole, is not a little proud of its connection with that celebrated physician Sir Matthew Austin, while Sir Matthew's father-in-law is wont to declare to all and sundry whom it may concern that there is only one man in England who knows how to treat the gout.

THE END.







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Mathew Austin.

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